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## Article

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Administrative Sciences

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*Suggested Citation:* Kruja, Alba Demneri; Hysaj, Belita; Oztas, Ahmet (2024) : The interplay of values and skill: How do they impact graduates' employability?, Administrative Sciences, ISSN 2076-3387, MDPI, Basel, Vol. 14, Iss. 9, pp. 1-17,  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci14090201>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/321015>

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## Article

# The Interplay of Values and Skill: How Do They Impact Graduates' Employability?

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this research is to explore the development of values and skills throughout university education and their subsequent manifestation in the workplace, with a particular focus on the impact on graduates' employability and the creation of value for society. The study's research question probes the dynamics of values, skills, employability, and social value creation by analyzing and evaluating the main missions of universities, which essentially involve teaching, researching, and extracurricular activities. An exploratory factor analysis is used to extract the relevant factors of graduates' performance. A progressive model is developed pointing out the interplay of values and skills that lead to professional performance. The research comes up with practical and theoretical implications. It seeks to provide helpful findings for higher education institutions, industry, and policymakers in promoting the enhancement of graduates' values and skills, ensuring their successful transition into the job market and generating long-term societal benefits.

**Keywords:** higher education; values; skills; graduates' employability



**Citation:** Kruja, Alba, Belita Hysaj, and Ahmet Oztas. 2024. The Interplay of Values and Skill: How Do They Impact Graduates' Employability?

*Administrative Sciences* 14: 201.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci14090201>

admsci14090201

Received: 25 July 2024

Revised: 26 August 2024

Accepted: 28 August 2024

Published: 2 September 2024



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## 1. Introduction

As the world becomes more interconnected and industries continue to evolve, employability has become a focal point for higher education institutions (HEIs) and employers worldwide. Employability encompasses a collection of accomplishments, abilities, knowledge, and individual traits that enhance graduates' prospects of securing employment and thriving in their preferred professions, resulting in advantages for themselves, the labor force, the community, and the economy (Yorke 2006).

The responsibility for fostering such crucial factors for employability in the workplace falls primarily on HEIs (Chetty 2012). The alignment of educational outcomes with the workforce needs to play an essential role in promoting both individual socioeconomic mobility and national economic growth and competitiveness (Finley 2021, p. 4). The transformation of universities into hubs of practical learning and career preparation is becoming one of the main reasons why students decide to pursue a degree, as HEIs are constantly striving to bridge the gap between academia and industry essentially through teaching and extracurricular activities (Kuh 2008). This can be attributed to the growing recognition of the need for graduates to possess not only academic knowledge but also a diverse range of skills, attributes, and values.

Nowadays, apart from the course edges, providing interdisciplinarity in trainings, enhancing collaboration within industry and with ecosystem stakeholders is crucial for sustainable growth (European Commission 2019; Kruja and Berisha 2021). This shift reflects a broader focus on the holistic development of students, equipping them with the values, skills, and attitudes critical for their overall growth and future professional opportunities.

In this perspective, HEIs' focus has switched, in addition to the acquisition of academic knowledge, to the development of values, skills, and attitudes that are critical for students' general growth and future professional possibilities as well. Moreover, HEIs have been

pressured over the past few years to add activities beyond teaching and research, with a third mission depicted as “contribution to society” (Abreu et al. 2016; Compagnucci and Spigarelli 2020; Urdari et al. 2017). These “third mission activities arise from the need of higher education institutions to contribute to society in a meaningful way through knowledge and technology transfer, lifelong learning, entrepreneurship or exchanges of workers with business”. (Mora et al. 2015, p. 30). Hence, the development of values, skills, and attitudes is mainly conducted by accomplishing the three general missions of HEIs, as follows: teaching, researching, and contributing to society. By closely examining and evaluating the core missions of universities, this research seeks to unravel the intricate relationship between values, skills, employability, and societal impact.

Understanding the interdependence of values and skills, as well as their joint influence on graduate performance, is critical for educational institutions, businesses, and policy-makers alike. It is highly important to investigate the extent to which the development of values and skills at HEIs affects graduates’ capacity to effectively satisfy the demands of the labor market and simultaneously create value for society.

This research examines the influence of developing values and skills via teaching, research, and extracurricular activities throughout the university, using Epoka University as a case study. Epoka University, located in Albania, has established itself as a distinguished institution of higher education that promotes a holistic approach to student growth (Epoka University 2023). The university serves as an exemplary case study for researching the impact of the cultivation of values and skills, guided by its commitment to academic excellence and the values outlined by the Observatory Magna Charta Universitatum (MCU), a global network of universities dedicated to fundamental values in higher education (Observatory Magna Charta Universitatum 2023).

Focusing on the individual student as the primary subject of investigation, the study examines how the values and skills developed through teaching, research, and extracurricular activities impact their employability and professional success. One pivot point is exploring how HEIs can contribute to developing factors essential to employability by fostering values and skills in their students.

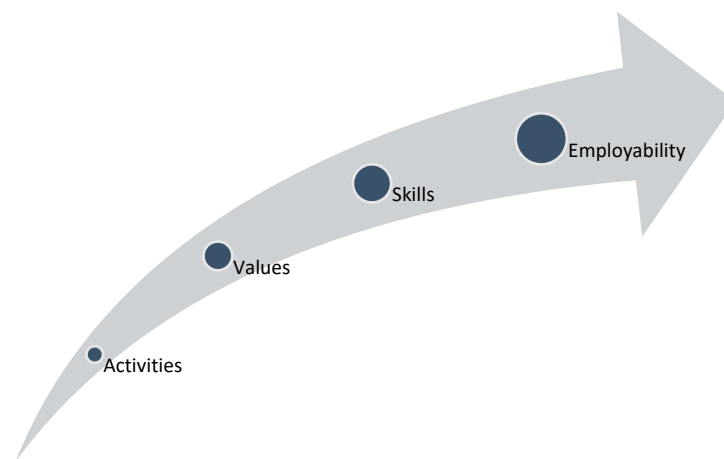
The study aims to add to the current literature on the influence of values and skills development in HEIs and sheds light on the practical consequences of these efforts in the context of Epoka University. This HEI has shown significant dedication to incorporating MCU principles and values throughout its educational activities such as teaching and the extracurriculars organized by the student clubs. This dedication lays solid groundwork for investigating the influence of these values on students’ growth and eventual professional achievement.

The purpose of this research is to develop a comprehensive model that integrates both values and skills, fostered through the university’s teaching, research, and extracurricular activities, and to evaluate their impacts on graduates’ employability (Figure 1). In this perspective, the study seeks answers to the following research questions:

**RQ 1:** *How do the values and skills developed through academic and extracurricular activities during university affect graduates’ professional performance?*

**RQ 2:** *How are the values and skills interrelated with each other?*

The study draws on information gathered at the 10th annual “Career Fair” at Epoka University, organized in May 2023. A purposive sample was obtained by surveying 52 companies, to assess the relationship between the acquired values, skills, and their work performances.



**Figure 1.** Research framework.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Employability, Skills, and Values

Academic accomplishments are perceived as a crucial condition for the employment of university graduates (Brown et al. 2002; Yorke 2006). The gap among graduates' fundamental competencies and labor market requirements is reported by many scholars worldwide (Ahmetaj et al. 2023; Al-Azzam 2022; Baird and Satyanarayana 2019; Houcine and Sofiane 2018; Jackson 2015). In addition to a university degree, employers have become increasingly specific in identifying the values and skills they desire, showcasing greater sophistication during their recruitment procedures (Harvey et al. 2002). The labor market is requesting graduates capable of adapting to dynamic environments, as well as working with divergent groups (Tomlinson 2023). Communication skills are listed continuously among the most crucial skills during the requirement process (Armstrong and Landers 2018). They are clearly expressing their belief that a university degree should encompass far more than just a certain number of courses (Kuh 2008), as there is room for improvement in the development of students' broader skills and qualities, such as teamwork, communication, leadership, critical thinking, and problem solving (Lowden et al. 2011). For graduates to attain sustainable employment, it is advised that universities enhance their current curriculum frameworks by emphasizing a greater focus on the employability skills and values that are highly sought after by the labor market (Fenta et al. 2019; García-Álvarez et al. 2022). Taking into consideration such shortcomings, curriculum frameworks are now incorporating attitudes and values more extensively, recognizing that competencies go beyond academic knowledge and skills (OECD 2019).

Hence, students emphasize the importance of communication skills, teamwork, time management, responsibility, and decision-making skills as competencies acquired during their time in university, which have proven to be beneficial in their present professional roles (Alanazi and Benlaria 2023; Catacutan et al. 2020; Kruja and Kadiasi 2020; Sermisuk et al. 2014; Zenelaj and Kruja 2017). Other useful skills also include problem solving, professionalism, leadership, multicultural fluency, and analytical thinking (National Association of Colleges and Employers 2022).

However, it is of high importance to note that academic knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values do not exist in isolation; rather, they evolve in an interconnected manner (OECD 2019). Interacting and collaborating are crucial for gaining a broad scope of "skills, attitudes, and experiences" facilitated by common "values, goals, and expectation" (Haste 2018). As educational institutions, organizations, professional environments, and communities become increasingly diverse in terms of ethnicity, culture, and language, highlighting the interdependence of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values becomes increasingly crucial. Gamage et al. (2021, p. 20) consider values as crucial "social or soft skills" that students should not only acquire within educational institutions but practice as well. Recognizing

shared social values and norms, in turn, could empower individuals to engage in collective action to bring about social change (Haste 2018, p. 13). Moreover, the OECD Learning Compass 2030 defines attitudes and values as the principles and beliefs that influence one's choices, judgements, behaviors, and actions on the path towards individual, societal, and environmental well-being (OECD 2019, p. 4). Advancing attitudes and values through HEIs is continuously promoted in international forums (OECD 2019). Hence, it is crucial that HEIs define their values through brief words or statements with the purpose of directing and informing policy or behavior (Observatory Magna Charta Universitatum 2023). Expressed values through diverse international organizations are reported in the Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Values as expressed by diverse organizations.

Organization	Values
Observatory Magna Carta Universitatum	Included as important values universities should adhere to are “academic freedom”, “institutional autonomy”, “social responsibility”, “integrity”, “fairness”, “equity”, “creativity”, “innovation”, “excellence”, “community service”, “diversity”, and “inclusiveness”.
OECD Global Competency Framework	Includes values (“valuing human dignity” and “valuing cultural diversity”) as guiding principles for attitudes, such as “openness towards people from other cultures”, “respect for cultural otherness”, “global mindedness”, and “responsibility”
Sustainable Development Goal 4.7 on Education	Focuses on Global Citizenship Education and Education for Sustainable Development; knowledge of global issues and universal values, such as “justice”, “equality”, “dignity”, and “respect”, as well as aptitudes for “networking and interacting with people of different backgrounds, origins, cultures and perspectives”, and behavioral capacities to “act collaboratively and responsibly to find global solutions for global challenges” and to “strive for the collective good”
Council of Europe Competence Framework for Democratic Culture	Includes values (e.g., “human dignity and human rights”, “cultural diversity”, and “democracy, justice, fairness, equality and the rule of law”) and attitudes (e.g., “openness to cultural otherness and other beliefs”, “world views and practices”, “respect”, “civic-mindedness”, “responsibility”, “self-efficacy”, and “tolerance of ambiguity”)
G7 Summit Leaders’ Declaration 2016	Recognizes the importance of common values and principles for all humanity (e.g., “freedom”, “democracy and respect for privacy”, “human rights”, and “human dignity”) at a time of violent extremism, terrorist attacks, and other challenges
United Nations instruments	Values articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN Charter, and the UN Millennium Declaration include “equality”, “freedom”, “justice”, “dignity”, “solidarity”, “tolerance”, “peace and security”, and “sustainable development”

Source: (adapted from OECD 2019; Observatory Magna Charta Universitatum 2023).

Among such notable organizations, the “Observatory Magna Charta Universitatum” takes a prominent role, as it is dedicated to helping universities across the globe establish, pursue, and embody their values effectively. Referring to MCU principles, values are crucial to helping universities understand and identify themselves and communicate that identity and mission to stakeholders, namely, students, employers, etc. (Observatory Magna Charta Universitatum 2023). The complexity and uncertainty faced by universities today are monumental, arising from the ever-expanding expectations of students and employers, the shifting dynamics of national and international politics, heightened competition for students and funding, challenges posed by internationalization, and the rapid evolution of technology. Values, which have been essential to universities since their creation, remain important tools in effectively overcoming these challenges (Observatory Magna Charta Universitatum 2023). Moreover, evidence suggests that endorsing value-related behavioral intentions is key for academics, HEIs, and other stakeholders (Moosmayer 2012). Hence, by reverting to the understanding of values as a set of guiding principles, employers can also gain enormous benefits (Gamage et al. 2021; Palmer et al. 2004).

According to the MCU framework, the most important values that universities should adhere to are academic freedom, institutional autonomy, social responsibility, integrity, fairness, equity, creativity, innovation, excellence, community service, diversity, and in-



clusiveness ([Observatory Magna Charta Universitatum 2023](#)). Studies show that students recognize the significance of corporate social responsibility in an academic context, as evidenced by their level of engagement in activities related to this concept ([Burcea and Marinescu 2011](#)). This means that the higher education sector and the corporate world share common ground when it comes to social responsibility, and instilling this value in students during their university experience could be a powerful catalyst to address the new realities of the environment and society. Among many other benefits, social responsibility has been proven to enhance workplace safety and make meaningful contributions to a company's long-term growth ([Koo and Ki 2020](#)). Similarly, community service has proven to be advantageous to students, fostering their professional, personal, and academic development ([Donnison and Itter 2010](#)). Students who are more aware of integrity see this value as an important element of both academic and graduate life ([Anohina-Naumeca et al. 2020](#)).

## 2.2. Extracurricular Activities

With the labor market becoming more competitive, a greater emphasis is placed on students' development of "soft skills" through extracurricular activities or work experience ([Al-Najjar and Merhi 2022](#); [Fisher 2013](#); [Kruja and Kalluci 2021](#)). Research has evidenced that acquiring compatible skills and competencies with the labor market during university is crucial for the employability of graduates ([Al-Azzam 2022](#); [Alanazi and Benlaria 2023](#); [Baird and Satyanarayana 2019](#); [Houcine and Sofiane 2018](#); [Qenani et al. 2014](#)). [Griffiths et al. \(2021\)](#) investigated, in addition to academic activities, the role extracurricular activities have in students' employment self-efficacy and transversal skills. Meanwhile, [Kanar and Bouckennooghe \(2021\)](#) explored the impact of extracurricular activities on students' employment self-efficacy perception.

Hence, another avenue for HEIs to enhance the workplace preparedness of their students is by going beyond academic studies. Extracurricular activities have been distinguished by many researchers as a critical instrument for enhancing graduates' employment ([Dickinson et al. 2020](#); [Griffiths et al. 2021](#); [Harvey et al. 2017](#); [Pinto and Ramalheira 2017](#); [Thompson et al. 2013](#)). Other scholars have provided evidence in the literature indicating that these activities have an even higher impact on graduates as "whole-person education" ([Chan 2016](#), p. 224) or even "life-wide learning" ([Jackson 2008](#)). Even though there is no consensus on what an extracurricular activity comprises, [Thompson et al. \(2013, p. 136\)](#) classifies it as activities such as "hobbies, social groups, cultural or religious, and voluntary or paid work" that focus on "communal interest or benefit", as well as "structure or organization". Other scholars have defined extracurricular activities as those endeavors organized inside the HEIs; nevertheless, they point out the need to expand the definition to integrate on-site activities as well as off-site ones ([Clegg et al. 2010](#); [King et al. 2020](#); [Stevenson and Clegg 2011](#)). Meanwhile [Griffiths et al. \(2021\)](#) determined extracurricular activities to be both on-site and off-site HEIs activities.

Engagement in extracurricular activities results in having a positive relationship with one's particular workplace ([Kanar and Bouckennooghe 2021](#); [Pinto and Ramalheira 2017](#); [Thompson et al. 2013](#); [Tieu et al. 2010](#)). [Stuart et al. \(2009\)](#) found that the opportunities and support provided by HEIs for these activities were closely linked to the stakeholders' awareness of their value and benefits. Additionally, other studies have confirmed that institutions have implemented policies to encourage and recognize students' participation in extracurricular activities, helping them stand out in a competitive labor market and make a positive impression on employers ([Prospects 2021](#); [Roulin and Bangerter 2013](#)).

These activities help students develop various skills and values, such as caring for responsibilities, time management, and intercultural communication ([Dickinson et al. 2020](#)), as well as confidence ([Harvey et al. 2017](#); [Thompson et al. 2013](#)), communication, teamwork, and project management ([Wood et al. 2011](#)). Beyond academic pursuits, students can benefit from nonacademic extracurricular activities and experiences during their university years, which allow them to develop skills, perspectives, beliefs, and values that are important in the workplace, thereby enhancing their overall experience as students.

Moreover, employers view the development of these skills as a crucial responsibility of both universities and professional organizations (Ibourk and El Aynaoui 2023; Montano et al. 2001).

### 3. Materials and Methods

#### 3.1. Data Collection

A quantitative research methodology was utilized to examine the perspectives of employers from different companies in Albania regarding the values and skills instilled by universities that are perceived as crucial for graduate employment. Specifically, this study targeted representatives of 64 companies that participated in the 10th annual “Career Fair” organized by “Epoka University” on 10 May 2023 and who had significant experience in and were directly responsible for the hiring process of graduates. The Career Fair is an annual event organized by “Epoka University”, designed to connect students with potential employers. Company representatives attend the fair to introduce their organizations, discuss job opportunities, internships, workshops, and other events, and invite students to engage with their companies. Students have the opportunity to learn about what skills and qualifications are needed for employment or internships, engage in discussions with the representatives (including alumni working at these companies), exchange contact information, and register for newsletters. This interaction helps bridge the gap between academic preparation and the labor market.

Data collection was carried out during the career fair, and a physical copy of the questionnaire was handed out to each of the company representatives to complete. The companies came from different sectors of the labor market such as banking and finance, architecture, construction and engineering, telecommunication, business, law, technology, artificial intelligence, etc. Each had sufficient time to read and comprehend the survey questions. On average, it took about 15 min for the respondents to complete the survey, allowing them to thoughtfully consider their responses. Out of the 64 questionnaires distributed, a total of 52 were returned, resulting in an 81% response rate.

#### 3.2. Research Instrument

The measuring instrument used for this study was a structured questionnaire organized in five sessions, each aiming to evaluate the perceptions of the respondents regarding (i) the percentage of “Epoka University” graduates within the workforces of the companies, (ii) the overall performance of these graduates, (iii) the significance of developing values and skills in higher education institutions from an employers’ perspective, (iv) the demonstration of these values and skills by “Epoka University” students at their companies, and (v) the importance of extracurricular activities in cultivating skilled employees. The respondents were required to evaluate them based on their performance/significance/importance, using a Likert Scale from 1-Not important at all to 5-Absolutely essential.

The relevance of the questionnaire is rooted in its alignment with established educational values and industry expectations. Since “Epoka University” is a signatory university of the Magna Charta Universitatum, the values in the questionnaire were cited from the “Living Values Prospectus” (Observatory Magna Charta Universitatum 2023). This ensures that the instrument evaluates values that are not only central to the university’s mission but are also recognized globally as essential to higher education institutions. Additionally, the skills in the questionnaire were derived from these values and supported by literature, emphasizing the questionnaire’s relevance in assessing the qualities that are most likely to contribute to graduates’ success in the workforce.

Lastly, the extracurricular activities were gathered from the annual reports of the “Dean of Students annual activity reports” (Dean of Students 2020) throughout the years. These activities represent a critical aspect of student life and are instrumental in the holistic development of graduates. By evaluating the perceived importance of these activities, the questionnaire captures a comprehensive view of the educational experience offered by “Epoka University”.

A pilot test was conducted before the administration of the questionnaire and used to refine the questions, ensuring clarity and relevance. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The alpha values for the different sections of the questionnaire were all above 0.7, indicating a high level of internal consistency and reliability.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Descriptive Analysis

The research involved responses from representatives of 52 companies from different sectors and industries. According to the findings, "Epoka University" can produce graduates in high demand from employers, as evidenced by their presence in the workforce of the companies surveyed.

#### 4.1.1. Employment Distribution of Epoka University Graduates

Following the surveying of the sample, the findings reveal that "Epoka University" graduates had a presence at a variety of companies. Specifically, 29 companies from the sample reported that less than 10% of their employees comprised "Epoka" graduates, 15 companies indicated that 11–20% were "Epoka" alumni, 7 companies had a proportion of 21–30%, and only 1 company had 31–50% of its employees from "Epoka". While none of the surveyed companies employed more than 50% of their staff as "Epoka" alumni, the fact that several companies reported having graduates from the university indicates a level of engagement and recognition of the university's graduates in the labor market. This distribution suggests that "Epoka University" is successfully producing graduates who are competitive in the job market, even though their presence within individual companies may not yet dominate, due to factors such as company size or diversity in recruitment sources.

#### 4.1.2. Performance Evaluation of Epoka University Graduates

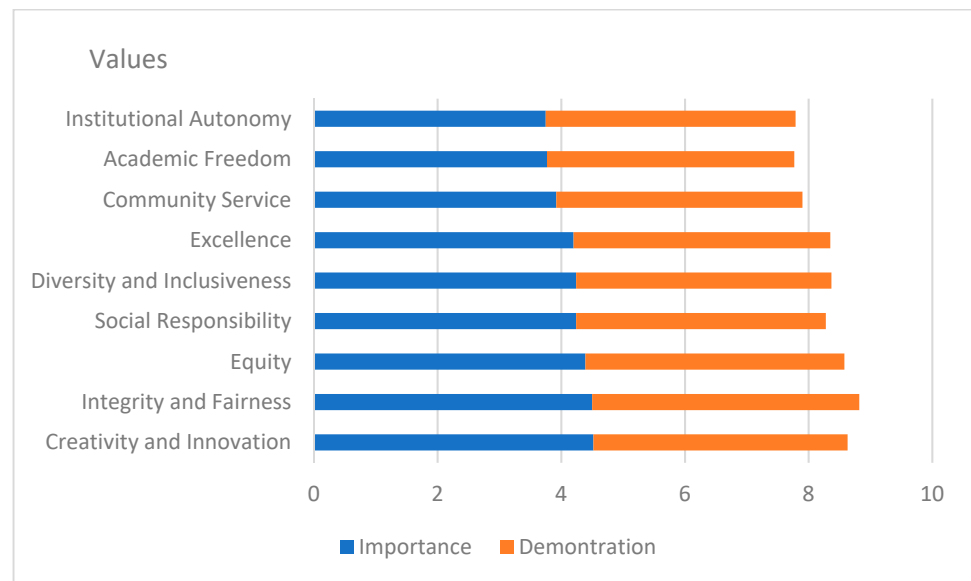
When assessing professional performance, the representatives considered the graduates' performance to be consistently good across all companies surveyed. "Epoka" graduates with whom they had hired, supervised, or collaborated were evaluated on a scale from 1—poor to 5—excellent, with the majority of ratings falling between 4 (above average) and 5 (excellent). The recorded evaluations appear to be relatively consistent and clustered around the mean value of 4.15, indicating agreement among respondents about the graduates' performances and the high level of satisfaction among employers, indicating a robust alignment between the skills and values instilled by the university and the expectations of the labor market.

#### 4.1.3. Importance of Educational Activities in Cultivating MCU Values

The importance of using educational activities within HEIs for cultivating MCU values (Figure 2) was asked to be rated by the respondents, who rated these values on a 5-point Likert scale, with the results indicating that all listed values are considered significant to some extent by the companies surveyed.

It is worth noting that the mean ratings for all values ranged from "moderately important" to "extremely important", indicating that all listed values were considered significant to some extent by the companies polled. However, the values with the highest mean ratings by the respondents were "Creativity and Innovation", "Integrity and Fairness", and "Equity", suggesting that companies particularly value these attributes, likely because they are essential in fostering an ethical, equitable, and forward-thinking workplace culture. Meanwhile, "Institutional Autonomy", "Academic Freedom", and "Community Service" appear to be less important, reflecting the perception that these attributes, while valuable, might be less directly applicable to the immediate needs of the business environment.

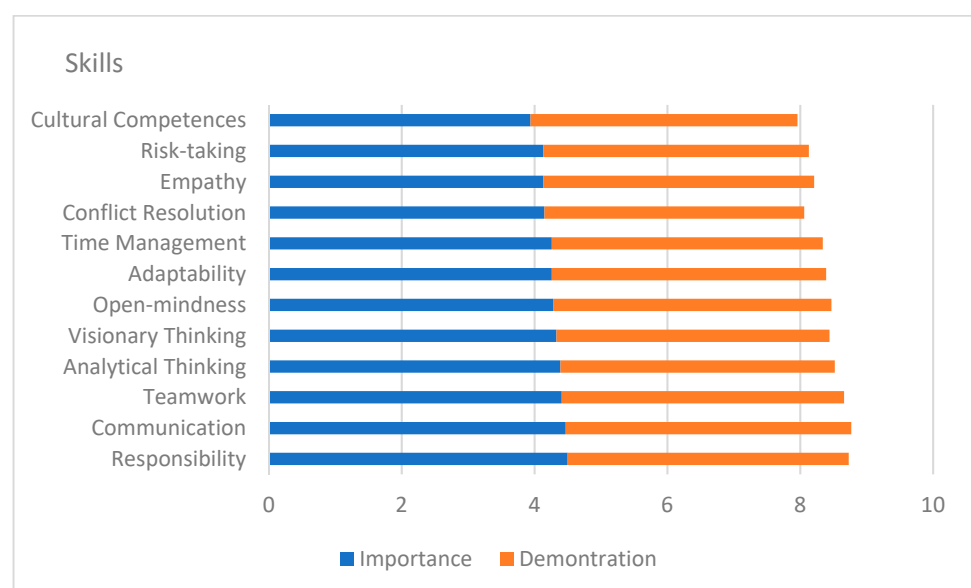




**Figure 2.** Cultivation of MCU values. Source: (authors' elaboration).

#### 4.1.4. Demonstration of Values by “Epoka” Graduates

Furthermore, respondents evaluated the graduates' demonstration of the mentioned values (Figure 3). Graduates demonstrated a generally high level of the mentioned values. The highest mean score for “Integrity and Fairness” was 4.32, indicating that the graduates were committed to ethical behavior and fairness. “Equity” and “Excellence” received similar high mean scores of 4.19 and 4.15, suggesting that the graduates prioritized equality and met high standards in their work. With a mean of 3.98, “Community Service” had the lowest mean score. While this is still a relatively high score, it suggests that the graduates' participation in community service may have been slightly lower when compared to other values. Overall, “Epoka” graduates demonstrated a positive alignment with the values, demonstrating a commitment to integrity, fairness, equity, social responsibility, and other important characteristics that contribute to a well-rounded education and professional development.



**Figure 3.** Skills development. Source: (authors' elaboration).

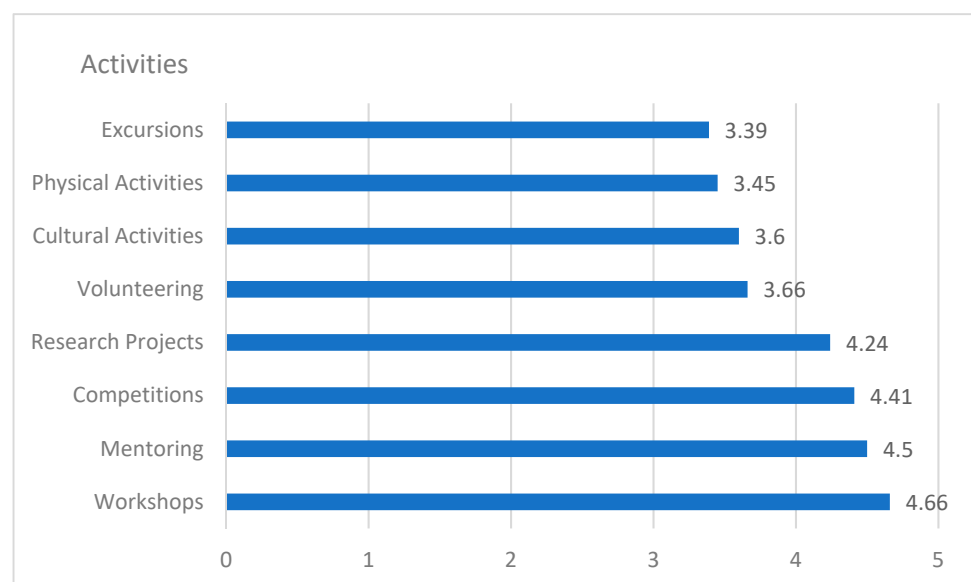
#### 4.1.5. Importance and Demonstration of Skills by “Epoka” Graduates

Following the above, the companies were asked to evaluate the importance of incorporating educational activities within HEIs as a method of developing the skills listed in Figure 3 below, indicating that companies consider all of the listed skills to be important for inclusion in HEIs.

Communication and responsibility were regarded as the most important skills, with mean values of 4.47 and 4.50, respectively, pointing to the priority that companies place on them and reflecting a broad consensus on their critical roles in both personal and professional contexts. Cultural competencies and empathy had lower mean values when compared to other skills, implying that companies may regard these skills as less important or in need of further development within HEIs, although they still remain important. The higher standard deviations associated with these skills, indicate that companies may have differing opinions or perspectives on their significance. Overall, the results indicate that companies value a wide range of skills, including analytical thinking, time management, teamwork, adaptability, open-mindedness, conflict resolution, visionary thinking, and risk-taking, as all had mean values greater than four. Furthermore, the participants were asked to rate the demonstration of these skills by “Epoka” graduates in their professional settings. The mean values for each skill ranged from 3.91 to 4.30, with most skills falling around or above the 4.00 mark, indicating that “Epoka” graduates are perceived to have good to excellent levels of proficiency in all of the listed skills. Communication had the highest average rating, with a mean of 4.30, suggesting that “Epoka” graduates excel at communicating effectively in professional settings. Conflict Resolution, on the other hand, had the lowest average rating, with a mean of 3.91, indicating that the graduates have room for improvement in this skill. They may need to improve their skills in resolving conflicts in professional settings.

#### 4.1.6. Importance of Performed Extracurricular Activities by “Epoka” Graduates

Additionally, the respondents had to evaluate the importance of the extracurricular activities organized by student clubs in cultivating values and skills that are beneficial from an employer’s perspective (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Extracurricular activities performed. Source: (authors’ elaboration).

When compared to other extracurricular activities, research projects, workshops, competitions, and mentoring emerged as the most highly regarded activities, receiving

relatively higher mean scores, suggesting that employers value candidates who engage in these intellectually and professionally enriching activities.

Physical activities and excursions had lower mean scores than other activities. While these activities undoubtedly contribute to personal well-being and teamwork, the lower scores suggest that employers prioritize activities that are more closely aligned with the specific competencies and experiences required in the professional world.

#### 4.2. The Interplay of Values and Skills

To assess how values and skills that Epoka University students hone throughout the entire academic journey interplay with each other, with a focus on professional performance, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed. EFA is a statistical tool aimed at recognizing the intrinsic relationships among the measured variables (Norris and Lecavalier 2010).

A reliability analysis of the measurement scales, along with an assessment of the level of interconnectedness among the questionnaire items, was conducted. It yielded a comprehensive measure of the questionnaire's repeatability or internal consistency. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.882 for the items used to measure the graduates' values, indicating a high level of internal consistency among the nine items and that the used scale is reliable. Moreover, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the items used to measure the graduates' skills was 0.927, which also suggests a high level of internal consistency among the 12 items of the scale. Additionally, the KMO value of 0.776 indicates that the data have sufficient sampling adequacy for factor analysis.

EFA with principal component extraction was applied to the sample, resulting in a values–skills model composed of four factors (Table 2), where each of them had internal consistency and reliability by explaining 68.4% of the variance in their professional performance.

**Table 2.** Rotated component matrix for values and skills.

	Rotated Component Matrix			
	Component			
	Community Responsiveness	Innovation	Strategic Planning	Effective Collaboration
Community Service	0.723			
Social Responsibility	0.711			
Integrity and Fairness	0.688			
Empathy	0.618			
Cultural Competences	0.608			
Equity	0.574			
Adaptability	0.556			
Diversity and Inclusiveness	0.481			
Creativity and Innovation		0.788		
Open-Mindedness		0.674		
Academic Freedom		0.665		
Excellence		0.651		
Institutional Autonomy		0.596		
Conflict Resolution			0.848	
Risk-Taking			0.832	
Visionary Thinking			0.686	
Analytical Thinking			0.572	
Communication				0.837
Responsibility				0.681
Teamwork				0.609
Time Management				0.458

Source: (authors' elaboration).

#### 4.2.1. Factor 1: Community Responsiveness

Value and skill items grouped under this factor (community service, social responsibility, integrity and fairness, empathy, critical competencies, equity, adaptability, and diversity and inclusiveness) contribute to graduates' capacity to interact with and comprehend various groups and stakeholders. They focus on the significance of being socially responsible, compassionate, and flexible in many cultural contexts and allow for graduates to build strong connections, understand social issues, and work successfully with various groups, hence improving their professional performance in the workplace and contributing to the capacity of working effectively with others, acting ethically, and positively contributing to society.

#### 4.2.2. Factor 2: Innovation

Values and skills brought together under this factor (creativity and innovation, open-mindedness, academic freedom, excellence, and institutional autonomy) represent the ability to think critically, question conventional views, reject herd mentalities, and accept innovative perspectives. Graduates equipped with such values and skills are more likely to approach issues with a problem-solving attitude, as they are inclined to think independently, strive for excellence in their work, and take risks. These abilities, when combined, develop an attitude of continual growth, flexibility, and outside-the-box thinking, enabling graduates to flourish in dynamic and ever-changing work situations.

#### 4.2.3. Factor 3: Strategic Planning

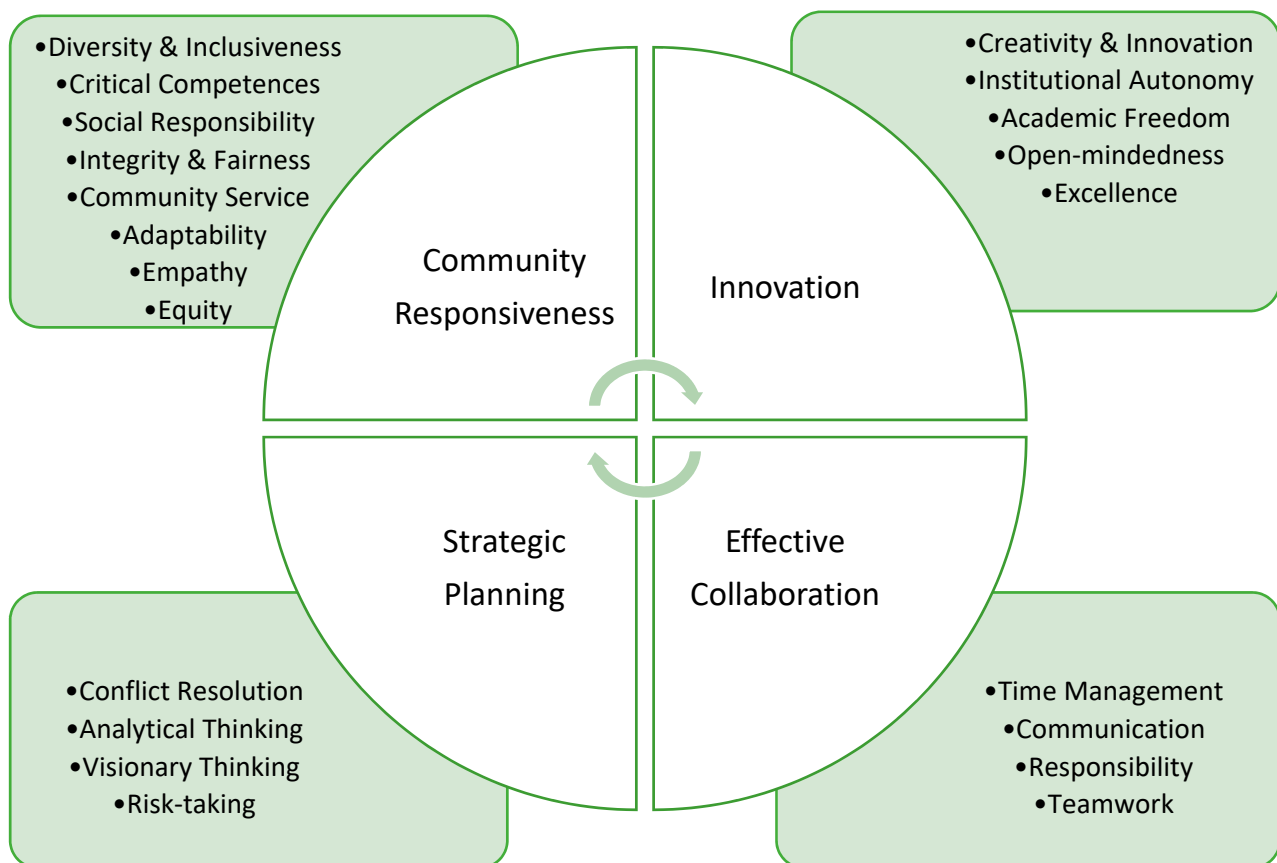
These factors' skills (conflict resolution, risk-taking, visionary thinking, and analytical thinking) are related to strategic and problem-solving attitudes. Graduates with great conflict resolution skills may handle differences successfully and reach mutually beneficial solutions; meanwhile, risk-taking is required for growth and innovation. Graduates can use visionary thinking to anticipate long-term objectives and design ways to accomplish them; however, analytical thinking provides graduates with the capacity to understand complicated circumstances, make educated decisions, and successfully solve challenges. Graduates demonstrate their ability to handle problems, recognize opportunities, and establish strategic plans for success by integrating these talents.

#### 4.2.4. Factor 4: Effective Collaboration

Value and skill items grouped under this factor are communication, responsibility, teamwork, and time management. Communication skills are essential for transmitting ideas, clearly expressing oneself, and understanding others. Being accountable for one's actions and obligations is emphasized in the concept of responsibility; moreover, teamwork is essential when partnering with others to achieve common goals. Time management ensures that time is allocated efficiently and that deadlines are met. These abilities enable graduates to communicate effectively, collaborate successfully, take control of their assignments, and manage their time effectively. Employers place a high value on these skills because they contribute to a productive and peaceful workplace.

### 5. A Progressive Performance Model

The four factors mentioned above can be connected to create a model representing graduates' progressive performances in their professional careers (Figure 5). This chronological model suggests that graduates who progressively develop their skills and values, starting with responding to their community's needs, progressing to innovation, strategic thinking, and, finally, collaborating effectively, have the potential for an optimal performance in the workforce and becoming well-rounded professionals who can make important contributions to their companies and achieving career success.



**Figure 5.** Progressive performance model.

Beginning with Factor 1 (Community Responsiveness), this factor lays a solid base for professional success. Graduates develop a sense of social responsibility and an understanding of the broader impact of their profession by participating in community service. They encourage integrity, justice, and empathy and form strong relationships by interacting well with others. Cultural competencies and equity allow them to successfully navigate a variety of different situations. This encouraging environment fosters innovation (Factor 2), pushing graduates to think outside the box, strive for excellence, and contribute to organizational growth. By building on a foundation of community engagement, they consider different perspectives and value open-mindedness. As a result of the combination of community responsiveness and innovation, graduates can overcome challenges and envision future possibilities through strategic planning (Factor 3). Graduates now use their strategic mindset to effectively resolve conflicts, drawing on the skills developed with the previous factors. They are willing to take calculated risks to explore new opportunities and push boundaries. Finally, effective collaboration (Factor 4) supports the previous factors by highlighting communication, accountability, teamwork, and time management, leading to increased productivity and achievement of collective goals.

The progressive model emphasizes the interdependence of values and skills, highlighting the need for an integrated approach to developing well-rounded graduates. This integration of values and skills is important as it ensures that graduates not only have the professional knowledge required for their roles but also act ethically and positively to contribute to society. Values serve as a moral guide, leading them to use their talents for the greater good. Simultaneously, skills enable them to translate their values into tangible actions, making an impact in their professional lives.



## 6. Discussion and Conclusions

The study's findings go beyond individual employability to the greater societal context and add to the wider discourse regarding graduate growth and employability. Through this research it was aimed to assess (i) the impacts that values and skills developed through academic and extracurricular activities during university have on graduates' professional performance and (ii) how these values and skills are interrelated.

The definition employed by Epoka University for extracurricular activities is in accordance with the definition of [Griffiths et al. \(2021\)](#), as well as what other scholars ([Clegg et al. 2010](#); [King et al. 2020](#); [Stevenson and Clegg 2011](#)) proposed, in defining as on-site and off-site the endeavors undertaken by students during their studies within the context of HEIs. A progressive model was developed, emphasizing the interdependence of the values and skills that ultimately contribute to optimal professional performance. Following the OECD Learning Compass 2030, this model recognizes that values and skills are not isolated entities but rather intertwined elements that shape an individual's abilities, attitudes, and behaviors in the workplace. Moreover, the study's results support the finding of [Chan \(2016\)](#) and [Jackson \(2008\)](#) in that the impact of these activities on graduates goes beyond professional performance, impacting their "whole-person education" and providing "life-wide learning". By elucidating the developmental trajectory of values and skills and their symbiotic nature, this research provides valuable insights into the factors that underpin successful professional outcomes. By ensuring that graduates possess the necessary values and skills, a successful transition into the job market can be facilitated, and long-term societal benefits can be generated.

The study's findings are in line with the recommendations of [Kanan and Bouckennooghe \(2021\)](#), [Thompson et al. \(2013\)](#), and [Tieu et al. \(2010\)](#) who have evidenced a critical positive relationship between students' engagement in extracurricular activities and the development of skills and attributes crucial for their workplace success. In their research, [Griffiths et al. \(2021\)](#) investigated, in addition to academic activities, the roles extracurricular activities have in students' employment self-efficacy and transversal skills. Moreover, [Kanan and Bouckennooghe \(2021\)](#) explored the impact of extracurricular activities on students' employment self-efficacy perceptions. In another study, [García-Álvarez et al. \(2022\)](#) grouped the critical skills for a smooth transition into the workplace into the following three dimensions: (1) job-related basic skills; (2) socio-relational skills; and (3) self-management skills. The current study advances the research by integrating not only skills but also values into a model of progressive performance in professional careers. Values and skills are grouped into four factors that define an educational path for graduates. The model aligns with the needs of society for competent employees who excel in their professional roles while also contributing to the larger good. Graduates who possess proficient skills in conjunction with positive values become agents of progressive change by addressing societal challenges through their work. Beginning with community engagement and interpersonal skills; moving on to creativity, innovation, and autonomy; continuing with problem-solving and strategic thinking skills; and finishing with effective communication, responsibility, and collaboration.

The transition from university to the professional realm marks a significant shift in the lives of graduates. The gap between academic learning and real-world application is not just superficial; it influences every aspect of their professional lives. The nuanced nature of ethical dilemmas requires that graduates cultivate a keen sense of judgment and moral reasoning to effectively navigate ethically complex situations. Furthermore, organizational cultures may vary, ranging from those that promote ethical behavior and sustainability to those that prioritize profit margins over all else. Overcoming established organizational norms requires graduates to demonstrate resilience, persuasive communication skills, and a firm commitment to their principles. Hence, fostering a culture of ethical leadership and corporate social responsibility within organizations is critical for creating an environment in which graduates can align their values with organizational goals. Other external factors, such as recessions, geopolitical instability, and disruptive innovation, can also have a

significant impact on graduates' career paths and how they implement values and skills. Such factors may lead to hiring freezes, layoffs, and reduced job opportunities, consequently reshaping the job market and forcing graduates to adjust their career plans accordingly by learning new skills to remain competitive. Despite having a diverse set of values and skills acquired through academic coursework and extracurricular activities, graduates may encounter barriers to advancement within organizations. Limited opportunities for career advancement, a lack of mentorship, and biases in talent management practices can hinder graduates' ability to implement what they have already learned in university.

This research has practical implications, as it provides helpful findings for HEIs, industry, and legislators in promoting the enhancement of graduates' values and skills, ensuring their successful transition into the job market and generating long-term societal benefits. Moreover, the study contributes to the current literature on the influence of values and skills development in HEIs. It sheds light on the practical outcomes of these efforts in the context of Epoka University. By incorporating these factors into learning experiences, universities can better equip their students with the skills and values required for success in the workforce. Furthermore, HEIs must define their values and expand the opportunities for extracurricular activities within the framework of their values. Similarly, employers can use this model to find prospective employees who possess the qualities they seek and are aligned with their organizational culture. In this way, they may be able to improve their selection process. Employers are increasingly understanding the relevance of both values and skills in their staff. They are looking for people who not only have the essential technical abilities for the position but also share the organization's values and contribute to its ethical and social duties. This alignment produces a pleasant work culture, encourages cooperation, boosts productivity, and builds trust among stakeholders.

There might be some possible limitations concerning this research, as its findings are limited to the context of Epoka University and the surveyed companies. Further studies could address a more diverse sample of institutions and industries ensuring a broader representation of varying educational contexts and labor markets. Moreover, while the current study relies on cross-sectional data, future research could benefit from longitudinal studies. Such studies would add value to the research gap by providing evidence through the observation of the long-term effects of acquired values and skills on graduates' career trajectories, offering more robust evidence of their impact over time.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, A.K., A.O. and B.H.; methodology, A.K. and B.H.; software, A.K. and B.H.; validation, A.K., A.O. and B.H.; formal analysis, A.K. and B.H.; investigation, A.K. and B.H.; resources, A.K. and B.H.; data curation, A.K. and B.H.; writing—original draft preparation, A.K. and B.H.; writing—review and editing, A.K. and B.H.; visualization, A.K. and B.H.; supervision, A.K., A.O. and B.H.; project administration, A.K. and A.O. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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