

Misaligned competence logics and the employability skills gap: Global business services sector in Poland

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The objective of the article is to identify the employability skills gap between multinational corporations (MNCs) operating in the global business services (GBS) sector and prospective graduates, and analyses how divergent institutional logics shape competence expectations at labour-market entry.

Research Design & Methods: The study drew on focus-group data from GBS sector employers and university students in Poland in early 2021, offering a reference point from a period preceding the widespread adoption of generative artificial intelligence in workplace processes. The framework integrates institutional logics and signalling theory to interpret the mechanisms underlying observed competence misalignments.

Findings: The study suggests a systematic misalignment between an academic logic that privileges codified, measurable knowledge outputs such as technical proficiency and analytical capability and a market logic prioritising behavioural adaptability, proactivity, and interpersonal resilience under uncertainty. This misalignment reflects fundamentally different informational bases. Employers in MNCs select dispositional and contextual performance signals inherently resistant to credentialing, whereas educational institutions signal through standardised, measurable outputs. Proactive personality, communication competence, and adaptability emerge as bridging competencies spanning both logics.

Implications & Recommendations: The article offers a reference point for research on how generative artificial intelligence may reshape skills demand in the GBS sector. Educational institutions should reform credentialing and curriculum design, particularly around dispositional competencies, rather than treating the gap as individual student preparation.

Contribution & Value Added: The article advances person-environment fit theory by adding curriculum design as a structural conditioning factor in person-job fit. It proposes a competence-logic misalignment model potentially transferable to MNC contexts across other national and sectoral settings, subject to empirical validation.

Article type: research article

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INTRODUCTION

There persists a gap between the competencies that higher education institutions develop in graduates and the competencies sought by employers. The gap remains one of the most enduring challenges in human resource management and education policy. Recent evidence indicates this gap is widening rather than narrowing. For instance, the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2025 projects that 39% of workers' core skills will undergo transformation by 2030, while the Cengage Group 2025 Graduate Employability Report reveals that only 30% of recent graduates secure employment in their

field of study, with 48% reporting they feel unprepared for entry-level positions. These findings especially concern multinational corporations (MNCs), which operate in complex, cross-border environments demanding competencies beyond those typically cultivated in national educational systems.

This article identifies the employment skills gap among MNCs operating in the global business services (GBS) sector. Prior research has documented the importance of soft skills for graduate employability (Finch *et al.*, 2013; McMurray *et al.*, 2016; Succi & Canovi, 2020) and identified sector-specific skills requirements across national contexts – including the IT sector in India (Jaiswal *et al.*, 2022), MNCs in Nigeria (Jiboku, 2023), and green MNCs in China (Taghian *et al.*, 2022). However, few studies theorise why the gap persists and through which mechanisms it reproduces.

This study moves beyond listing skills gaps to argue that employability shortfalls in MNCs stem from a clash between two institutional competence logics. Using institutional logics theory (Thornton *et al.*, 2012), we show that educational institutions and MNC employers are embedded in different institutional orders that generate competing definitions of ‘competence.’ Universities operate within a professional-academic logic driven by standardised assessment and credentialing. They prioritise codified knowledge, analytical reasoning, and demonstrable technical proficiency. By contrast, market logic governs MNCs, shaped by volatility, uncertainty, and cross-cultural complexity. They prize dispositional attributes: proactivity, resilience to stress, adaptability, and the ability to communicate effectively under ambiguity.

Educational provision reinforces this misalignment: universities can formally certify knowledge and technical skills, but the behavioural attributes valued by MNCs are much harder to codify, standardise and credential. Employers’ workplace experience further amplifies information asymmetries, as employers and educators not only possess different information, but also interpret ‘key competencies’ through different lenses. Signalling theory (Spence, 1973) clarifies why this mismatch persists. Because the behavioural attributes MNCs seek resist signalling via formal qualifications, educational institutions double down on what they can reliably certify. In doing so, they reproduce the very competence gap that MNCs lament. Therefore, this article addresses two research questions: (RQ1) How do employers and students construct and prioritise employability competences in the GBS sector? (RQ2) How do divergent institutional logics shape these expectations?

The presented study drew on focus group data collected in January-February 2021 from employers representing GBS-sector MNCs in Krakow, Poland, and university students as prospective employees. Poland offers a particularly instructive context: it ranks as the leading destination for business services in the Central and Eastern European region, hosting more than 2 000 BPO, SSC/GBS, IT, and R&D centres and employing nearly 490 000 professionals (ABSL, 2025; Ferencikova & Grachová, 2024). Poland’s GBS sector is a knowledge-intensive business services (KIBS) environment in which the interplay of technical and behavioural competencies is especially salient. Finally, studies of employability skills in transitional and emerging economies remain scarce (Nisha & Rajasekaran, 2018).

We collected the data at a historically specific juncture: early 2021, following the initial COVID-19-driven transformation of work practices but preceding widespread adoption of generative artificial intelligence tools from late 2022. Therefore, the findings relate to a transitional baseline before major job market disruptions. These misalignments should intensify as AI-driven automation further affects adaptability, creative thinking, and socio-emotional competencies, which educational systems have been slowest to develop (World Economic Forum, 2025).

Firstly, the article advances a theoretical explanation for the employability skills gap rooted in the misalignment of institutional competence logics. Secondly, it enriches person-environment fit theory (Kristof-Brown *et al.*, 2005) by adding curriculum design as a structural conditioning factor in person-job fit, connecting macro-level institutional dynamics to micro-level adjustment outcomes during organisational socialisation. Thirdly, it provides an empirically grounded baseline model against which future studies can assess how digital transformation and AI reshape competence expectations in the GBS sector.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Employee Skills in MNCs and the Persistence of the Employability Gap

Employability skills comprise the personal attributes and abilities that enable individuals to secure and sustain employment and to progress in their careers (Knight & Yorke, 2003; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Álvarez-González *et al.*, 2017). Mohan *et al.* (2018, p. 66) synthesise employability skills as ‘personal skills and attributes demonstrated by an individual that distinguish one job seeker from another.’ Their meta-analysis identified 158 distinct employability skills, with teamwork, problem-solving, communication, and analytical skills appearing the most frequently. Multidimensional operationalisations extend this definition to encompass occupational expertise, anticipation and optimisation, personal flexibility, corporate sense, and balance. This meta-analysis of national and sectoral contexts omits the multicultural dimension while it is important for the European labour market, characterised by global and pan-European workers’ mobility (Andrews & Higson, 2008). Together, these dimensions are measurable at the individual level and predictive of career outcomes (Heijde & Van Der Heijden, 2006). However, the composition and relative importance of these skills vary substantially by industry, company type, and national context (Chowdhury & Miah, 2019; Mohan *et al.*, 2018).

For MNCs in the GBS sector, several pressures shape the skills landscape. The increasing sophistication of information technology raises the importance of digital competence while making routine cognitive tasks automatable (Jaiswal *et al.*, 2022). GBS operations are inherently cross-border, which demands cultural and linguistic competencies for effective boundary spanning (Barner-Rasmussen *et al.*, 2014). The shift from volume-based to value-based service in GBS centres has raised the premium on initiative, judgment, and adaptive problem-solving over process compliance (Farndale *et al.*, 2010; Herbert *et al.*, 2020; ABSL, 2025). Recent industry evidence suggests these trends continue to intensify (ABSL, 2025).

Despite consistent evidence of employer dissatisfaction with graduates’ preparedness, the gap persists. These findings recur across multiple countries and decades (Evans-Greenwood *et al.*, 2015; Messum *et al.*, 2017; Rao, 2014; Chhinzer & Russo, 2018; QS Global Employer Survey, 2024). These findings also align with employability research highlighting communication, problem-solving, adaptability and resilience as key determinants of graduate employability (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Tomlinson, 2017; Succi & Canovi, 2020), which recent surveys confirm remain top recruiter concerns (QS Global Employer Survey, 2024). Similarly, prior studies documented gaps between graduate self-perceptions and employer expectations (Finch *et al.*, 2013; Jackson, 2013; Clarke, 2018), gaps that recent industry data suggest persist despite employability initiatives (Cengage, 2025).

Polish and Central and Eastern European evidence points the same way. Competence audits in the Krakow BPO/IT sector identified initiative, communication skills, intercultural sensitivity, and learning agility as key deficits among graduates entering the industry (CEAPP, 2012). Broader labour-market studies confirmed that employers consistently value social and behavioural competencies, such as co-operation, self-organisation, and creativity, more highly than technical qualifications (Jelonek *et al.*, 2019), while research on economics graduates highlighted weaknesses in communication and argumentation skills (Dorożyński *et al.*, 2016). However, these studies mainly documented the mismatch rather than explain the mechanisms through which it is reproduced. The presented study addressed that gap by theorising competence-logic misalignment as a structural mechanism underpinning the persistence of the employability skills gap.

Although higher education institutions have introduced curricular reforms and innovative teaching over recent decades aimed at enhancing graduate employability (Knight & Yorke, 2003; Succi & Canovi, 2020), these changes remain largely incremental and uneven across institutions and countries. Dominant assessment and credentialing structures continue to privilege codified and measurable knowledge outcomes, whereas employers increasingly value behavioural and adaptive competencies. This suggests the employability gap persists not only because of a lack of educational reform, but also by differences in the underlying competence logics shaping educational and labour market expectations.

Institutional Logics and Signalling Mechanisms for Theorising the Gap

Institutional logics theory explains how societal sectors create distinct organising principles that shape actors' behaviour (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton *et al.*, 2012). An institutional logic constitutes 'the socially constructed, historical patterns of cultural symbols and material practices' by which individuals and organisations produce and reproduce meaning systems (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999, p. 804). Different institutional orders – the market, the profession, the state, and the corporation – define value, legitimacy, and competence distinctly.

The theory explains why educational institutions and employers consistently differ in competence priorities regarding the employability skills gap. Universities operate predominantly within a professional-academic logic that defines competence through codified knowledge, standardised assessment, and credentialed expertise. This logic prizes what is measurable, certifiable, and comparable across individuals: technical proficiency, analytical reasoning, domain-specific knowledge, and examination performance. Students, socialised within this logic, internalise a human capital conception of employability that treats skill acquisition as an investment in measurable capabilities yielding labour-market returns (Becker, 1964).

By contrast, MNC employers, especially those in the GBS sector, operate within a market logic marked by uncertainty, competitive pressure, and the need for rapid adaptation to shifting client demands and technological disruptions. Within this logic, competence rests not on what an individual knows but on how they behave under conditions of ambiguity. Expected behaviours include proactivity in the absence of clear instructions, resilience under setbacks, the capacity to communicate across cultural and functional boundaries, and disposition towards continuous learning. These attributes go by various names: 'soft skills,' 'behavioural competencies,' or 'enduring human capabilities' (Deloitte, 2025). They resist the standardised assessment and credentialing that characterise the academic logic.

Signalling theory (Spence, 1973) offers a complementary mechanism. Under information asymmetry, educational credentials signal underlying capability. Yet these signals are structurally biased, reflecting what educational institutions can assess and certify (e.g. technical knowledge, analytical performance) while largely ignoring the dispositional attributes MNC employers prioritise. The result is a signalling gap – not because graduates lack these attributes, but because credentials do not convey them. Employers therefore adopt alternative selection mechanisms – interviews, assessment centres, probation – to assess competencies that educational signals miss. This structural misalignment endures regardless of curriculum reform because it stems from the different informational bases of educational certification and employer selection.

Experience asymmetry offers an alternative or complementary explanation for the divergence. Employers directly observe effective workplace performance, whereas students form competence expectations from second-hand sources: curricula, peers, and media. Succi and Canovi (2020) identify work experience and generation as key factors differentiating employer and student views of soft skills. This account complements rather than contradicts the institutional logics perspective, describing its proximal mechanism. Academic logic shapes the informational environment in which students form expectations (curricula, assessment, peer socialisation), whereas market logic shapes the experiential environment in which employers form theirs (observed performance, adjustment outcomes, client feedback). Experience asymmetry thus results from operating within different institutional logics rather than constituting an independent explanation.

This theoretical framing generates two propositions that guide the empirical analysis.

Proposition 1: Employer competence expectations in MNCs will systematically favour dispositional and relational attributes (aligned with the market logic), while student competence expectations will systematically favour codified and task-oriented attributes (aligned with the academic logic).

Proposition 2: The competencies identified as most critical by employers will correspond to the antecedents of successful organisational socialisation (Bauer *et al.*, 2007), reflecting the market logic's orientation towards contextual performance rather than static capability.

The GBS Sector in Poland: Context and Significance

Poland's business services sector comprises Business Process Outsourcing (BPO), Shared Services Centres (SSC), Global Business Services (GBS), Information Technology (IT), and Research and Development (R&D) operations. As an umbrella term, GBS covers professional, legal, financial and accountancy (F&A), IT, R&D, Human Resource (HR), and operational support services (Wirtz *et al.*, 2015). The sector qualifies as knowledge-intensive business services (KIBS), where specialised, qualification-dependent work and human capital underpin complex intellectual tasks (Muller & Doloreux, 2009).

Poland figures prominently in the global GBS landscape. In 2025, the sector encompassed 2 081 centres from 46 countries, employing over 488 700 people, 84.2% of whom worked in foreign-owned centres. Exports of business services were valued at 42.3 billion USD, growing at a compound annual rate of 6.9%. Access to qualified staff, notably a large pool of multilingual graduates, remains a key locational advantage attracting MNCs, with Krakow as the largest employment hub (Górecki, 2020; Kopyciński, 2020).

Sector-level indicators anchor this analysis. Innovation is widespread: 74.5% of centres introduced innovations in the previous three years. However, innovation increasingly stems from internal process redesign and global capability centres rather than formal R&D, reflecting the premium GBS employers place on proactivity and creative problem-solving. Talent shortages remain structural but seem less severe than in 2022. In the 2025 survey, 93.5% of respondents pointed to rising labour costs as a threat to Poland's shoring attractiveness, while 60.0% cited talent shortages in specific areas. Poland's position in the World Talent Ranking improved from 44th in 2023 to 36th in 2024, indicating a partial recovery in high-quality human capital for knowledge-intensive activities (ABSL, 2025). These dynamics make Poland's GBS sector a particularly suitable context for examining employability skills gaps in MNCs.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

We used a qualitative research design to examine employers' and students' perceptions of employability skills in the GBS sector. Given the exploratory focus on how stakeholders construct and prioritise competence, we adopted an interpretive approach to capture the cognitive patterns, social meanings, and normative frameworks shaping participants' expectations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The study followed an abductive logic, moving iteratively between theory and data. We derived the two competence logics and propositions deductively from theory and used as an interpretive lens, whereas we acquired the competence categories inductively from the focus-group data. Given this design, the study's theoretical contribution takes the form of propositions: conjectures grounded in theory that future research can examine empirically.

Data Collection

We collected data in January-February 2021, a period requiring explicit methodological attention. The period sits between two major disruptions to work. First, COVID-19 had already triggered a rapid, largely unplanned shift to remote and hybrid work, reshaping communication, supervision, and demands on employees' self-management in MNCs. Second, it preceded the public release of ChatGPT in November 2022 and the subsequent generative AI adoption that has reframed skills since 2023. This timing captures competence expectations after distributed work but before AI-driven automation fully emerged. The findings therefore provide a pre-transformation baseline – a reference point against which later reports of accelerated competence disruption (World Economic Forum, 2025; Cengage, 2025) can be calibrated. Repeated cross-sectional or longitudinal studies could then test the theorised intensification of competence logic divergence. Thus the 2021 data serve a generative theoretical function: they not only describe past conditions but ground propositions about divergence mechanisms for future testing.

We collected data from 28 participants in four Focus Group Interviews Online (FGIO), a method suited to pandemic conditions (Fox *et al.*, 2007) and well suited to studying socially constructed opinions and collective sense-making (Maison, 2019; Denscombe, 2014). We recorded and fully transcribed the interviews with informed consent. Online focus groups offered convenient access to busy professional participants; as with any modality they involve trade-offs, such as reduced visibility of non-verbal cues, which we kept in view during facilitation and analysis. We selected participants purposively. Two groups comprised business representatives responsible for recruitment and in-house training in MNCs in Krakow's GBS sector, ensuring direct knowledge of competence expectations and hiring criteria (7 and 11 managers in sequential sessions). Two groups comprised students from the Krakow University of Economics approaching labour-market entry, positioning them to articulate competence expectations relevant to MNC employment (6 and 4 students in sequential sessions). Each session lasted 60-90 minutes.

Including students as a second stakeholder group has empirical justification: 53.9% of GBS employees are under 35 and 13.6% are 26 or younger (ABSL, 2025), making recent graduates the main recruitment pool. We purposively selected students from the student governing body (broad knowledge of programmes and curricula) and from individualised programmes (high-performing students with tailored trajectories).

The business representative interview schedule covered: competencies sought in recruitment (expected skills), perceived deficiencies in graduates' preparation (competency gaps), and skills that future GBS-oriented curricula should prioritise (perceived curricular gaps). Student interviews examined perceptions of MNC work (benefits, challenges, career implications) and beliefs about the competencies required in the sector.

Given the exploratory, contrast-oriented design, analytical adequacy rested on the consistency of competence patterns within and across the two groups and their alignment with independent sectoral evidence, rather than on conventional thematic saturation.

Data Analysis

We thematically coded the transcribed data in MAXQDA. We inductively derived first-order codes from interview data, then mapped them onto the European Commission's key competences for lifelong learning (EC, 2019), used as a second-order analytical framework. The eight competences provided a standardised structure for comparing stakeholder groups; these competences were: literacy, multilingual, mathematical/scientific/technological/engineering, digital, personal/social/learning to learn, citizenship, entrepreneurship, and cultural awareness and expression.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Employers' Perspective

Expected Competencies

In interviews, GBS employers consistently prioritised soft skills and personal attributes over technical qualifications. They noted that technical competencies serve as baseline recruitment criteria, checked at entry. Fluency in at least one foreign language (with mandatory English) and strong MS Office skills, especially Excel, counted as non-negotiable prerequisites that cannot be developed after hiring.

Beyond basic thresholds, employers sought mainly behavioural and relational competencies. They prioritised communication (including negotiation), teamwork, and relationship-building, plus presentation skills and confidence in articulating and defending one's views in multinational teams. A 'can-do' attitude – optimism, solution focus, and belief that challenges are surmountable – was seen as crucial and closely aligned with proactivity, defined as anticipatory, change-oriented, self-initiated efforts to influence one's environment (Grant & Ashford, 2008). One employer captured this expectation directly:

I have the sense that young people today lack proactivity – going beyond your own tasks, beyond your own scheme of ‘what I have to do’, and wanting to do something more. The attitude now is: this is mine, and beyond that I don’t work ... I don’t step outside my so-called comfort zone. (E1)

Employers deemed proactivity, independent problem-solving, flexibility, and openness to diversity essential in the dynamic GBS context. Employers also valued stress resilience, self-confidence, innovative and ‘outside the box’ thinking, change management and adaptability, and the ability to accept constructive criticism while preserving self-esteem and stepping beyond one’s comfort zone.

The interviews show respondents focused far more on dispositional and interpersonal than on technical competencies. Through the institutional-logics lens, this pattern indicates a market logic centred on contextual performance under uncertainty: threshold skills (language, Excel) are the codifiable minimum the academic logic can certify, whereas the dispositional competencies dominating employer discourse lie in a domain formal credentials are ill-equipped to signal. Proactivity, communication skills, and teamwork received particular weight as contextually enacted rather than statically demonstrable, and thus resist standardised assessment. Respondents noted that specific technical tools and software in GBS firms can be learned on the job, whereas the attitudinal and communicative orientation required for complex, multinational settings cannot be readily taught. Read through this lens, such framing reflects the market logic’s emphasis on adaptability over accumulated knowledge.

Competency Gaps and Perceived Curricular Deficiencies

Business representatives reported a mismatch between university education and GBS labour market needs. They noted that curricula emphasise hard skills and codified knowledge, while the qualities that distinguish successful candidates – a ‘can-do’ attitude, openness, self-confidence, proactivity, and creativity – receive little systematic attention. Employers especially stressed adaptability to technological change, wanting employees who engage creatively with evolving processes rather than simply follow a ‘copy-and-paste’ model.

The most frequent gaps among graduates were low proactivity, weak self-confidence, and poor communication skills. Language fluency and MS Office skills were also sometimes lacking, but respondents treated these separately from the soft skills gap. Technical deficits concern codifiable, teachable domains where academic assessment works reasonably well. The soft skills gap instead reflects a deeper misalignment between what academia values and rewards and what the market requires for contextual performance. This requirement extends even to ostensibly codified domains: one employer noted that candidates may possess technical knowledge yet be unable to apply it contextually:

For me it matters especially that the person can turn that hard knowledge into practice They may know, say in finance, the principles of accounting, but when they have live material in front of them in the company, they can’t make a move with it from any angle. (E12)

This distinction is crucial. Incremental curriculum changes can reduce technical gaps; the soft skills gap persists because it is rooted in different institutional incentive structures shaping education and hiring. Employers implicitly recognised this, often stating that ‘attitude cannot be taught,’ signalling that some competencies lie beyond the academic logic’s effective reach.

Table 1 maps these employer priorities against the EU lifelong learning competence framework (EC, 2019): personal, social and learning-to-learn competence and entrepreneurship competence dominate employer discourse, while citizenship and science/mathematical/engineering competences remain largely absent – a distribution whose theoretical significance we examine in the Discussion.

Table 1. Lifelong learning competencies vs companies' and students' perspectives

The perspective	Specific skills and competencies	Lifelong learning competency						
		Literacy	Multilingual	Mathematical / Science	Digital	Personal	Entrepreneurship	Cultural
the companies' perspective	Communication skills	•						
	Good teamwork					•		
	Presentation skills	•				•		
	'Can-do' attitude					•		
	Proactivity					•		•
	Resistance to stress, self-confidence					•	•	
	Thinking 'out of the box'						•	
	Ability to manage change, adaptability						•	
	Ability to accept criticism					•		
	Good knowledge of MS Office			•	•			
	Fluent English		•					
the students' perspective	Proactive attitude, willingness to learn					•	•	•
	Ability to handle Excel well			•	•			
	Fluent knowledge of English		•					
	The ability to work on projects					•		
	Very well-developed communication skills	•						
	Analytical skills			•				

Source: own study.

The Students' Perspective

Perception of Employability Skills

Students highlighted key competencies for MNC employment: a proactive, autonomous, and learning-oriented attitude; Excel proficiency; fluent English; project work experience; strong communication; and analytical skills. Mapped to the lifelong learning framework, their priorities concentrated in mathematical/scientific/digital competence and personal/social/learning-to-learn competence, with relatively less focus on entrepreneurship than employers.

The contrast with employer priorities aligns with Proposition 1. Socialised in the academic logic, students emphasised codifiable, task-oriented skills (Excel, analytical abilities, project execution) amenable to university assessment and credentialing. Although they mentioned dispositional competencies (proactivity, communication), they framed these instrumentally, in terms of task completion, not in the relational and adaptive terms used by employers. This pattern fits both the institutional logics account and experience asymmetry as a mechanism: lacking direct exposure to GBS work, students derive competence expectations from their informational environment – curricula, assessment criteria, and peer socialisation – all structured by the academic logic.

Students recognised the international nature of GBS work and the need for change-management skills and psychological preparedness. They observed a mismatch between curricula and labour market needs: universities rely on established methods that lag behind evolving workplaces, offering strong theory but limited practice. As one student put it:

Some programmes offer too much theory ... there are no practical classes. Even if there are some exercises in a subject, they are ... very superficial ... unlike what you later encounter at work. (S2)

Students noted that GBS employers are generally willing to train newcomers in job-specific skills and that entry-level roles rarely demand extensive prior experience. At the same time, they saw GBS firms as potentially limiting individual subjectivity, treating employees as functional parts of larger processes. One student described this vividly:

[In a corporation] we treat the employee as a number in the payroll system ... beyond the team leader, beyond the immediate team, we don't know our surroundings, we feel like a tiny creature in the whole vastness of the organisation's functioning. (S6)

This perception, accurate or not, carries interpretive significance. It may suggest that students' mental models of MNC work sit in tension with the proactive, initiative-taking stance employers expect. The view of corporations as constraining agency thus conflicts with employer demands for proactivity and autonomous problem-solving, showing that competence misalignment concerns not only skills but also differing understandings of professional work.

Figure 1 presents the distribution of competencies identified by employers and students, delineating the shared bridging competencies at the intersection of both stakeholder groups and the exclusive priorities aligned with their respective institutional logics.

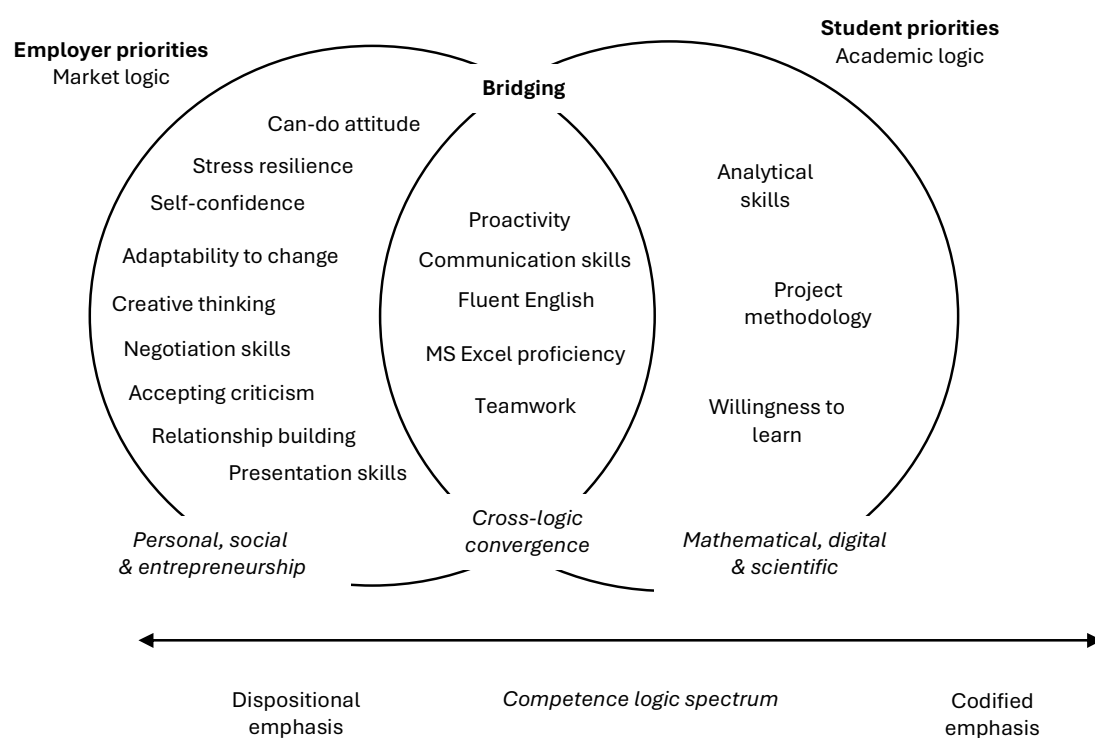


Figure 1. Bridging and divergent employability competencies across institutional logics: Employer and student priorities in the GBS sector

Source: own elaboration.

Discussion

The empirical findings support both propositions derived from the institutional logics' framework. The answer to RQ1 is consistent with Proposition 1: employer competence expectations favoured dispositional and relational attributes, while student expectations leaned more towards codified, task-oriented capabilities. This divergence reflects two distinct competence logics rooted in different institutional orders, which answers RQ2.

The academic logic under which students form their competence expectations treats employability as a function of accumulated human capital: the more technical knowledge and certifiable skills one possesses, the more employable one becomes. Universities' assessment practices, grading systems,

and credentialing mechanisms reinforce this logic, systematically rewarding the demonstration of codified knowledge. Students, rationally responding to these institutional incentives, develop a competence profile weighted towards what the academic system measures and values.

The market logic under which GBS employers form their competence expectations treats employability as a function of contextual adaptability: the capacity to perform effectively under conditions of uncertainty, change, and cross-cultural complexity. The operating conditions of MNCs reinforce this logic – volatile client demands, technological disruption, distributed multinational teams – which consistently demonstrate that technical knowledge, while necessary, is insufficient for successful performance. Employers, drawing on their accumulated experience of which employee attributes predict success, develop recruitment criteria weighted towards what their operational context demands.

The signalling mechanism explains why this divergence persists despite broad recognition of the gap. Educational credentials signal codified knowledge, analytical ability, and technical skill, but are structurally silent on dispositional attributes, which resist standardised, comparative assessment. MNC employers, aware of this limit, add interview-based behavioural assessments, creating an informational asymmetry that academically socialised candidates are ill-equipped to handle. The gap stems from the signalling system's structure. The stability of employer priorities over time indicates its structural nature: sectoral competence audits in Krakow as early as 2012 highlighted the same key skills, showing that the divergence observed in 2021 is not a pandemic anomaly but a persistent feature of Poland's GBS sector (CEAPP, 2012).

One might object that, if the signalling gap is the operative mechanism, the spread of alternative credentials should close it; the credentials being competency-based assessment, digital badges, micro-credentials, and behavioural simulations. Yet they have not resolved the misalignment. Three factors limit their effectiveness. Firstly, alternative credentials lack legitimacy: employer acceptance is uneven, and their signalling value depends on achieving the institutional recognition established degrees already enjoy. Secondly, large-scale assessment of dispositional competencies faces reliability and validity problems that technical-skill assessment does not, because such attributes are context-dependent and observation-intensive. Thirdly, and most importantly, the academic logic resists assessment mechanisms that cannot be standardised across large cohorts, since standardisation underwrites its legitimation function. The gap's persistence despite available remedies is therefore consistent with the institutional logics account: the issue is institutional orders' structural resistance to tools originating outside their own logic (Gold, 2024).

The experience-asymmetry explanation forms a component of, not an alternative to, the institutional logics framework. Employers' accumulated experience of what predicts workplace success clearly shapes their competence priorities, and this operates independently of institutional logics. Crucially, this experience asymmetry does not close the gap even when its implications reach academia. Employers' expectations have been widely documented and shared through industry reports (ABSL, 2025), academic studies (Succi & Canovi, 2020), and employer-university fora. If the divergence were purely informational – students simply not knowing what employers want – this extensive documentation should have reduced the gap. Its persistence despite broad dissemination indicates a structural problem: the academic logic systematically downweights information that does not fit its assessment and credentialing practices, regardless of its availability. Experience asymmetry captures a real phenomenon, but institutional logics explain why its effects are not self-correcting.

Proposition 2 is consistent with the observed alignment between employer-prioritised competencies and the established antecedents of successful organisational socialisation. Identified by Bauer *et al.* (2007) as a key predictor of newcomer adjustment, proactive personality maps directly onto the 'can-do' attitude and the proactivity that employers emphasised as most critical: a linkage reinforced by evidence that proactive personality predicts work engagement, particularly in team contexts and under conditions of organisational support (Wang *et al.*, 2017). The communication competence and relationship-building skills highlighted by employers correspond to the information-seeking behaviour that newcomers must enact to reduce uncertainty during socialisation (Morrison, 1993). Adaptability and self-confidence align with self-efficacy, a further established antecedent of adjustment success

(Cooper-Thomas & Anderson, 2006). A methodological caveat is needed: researchers analytically inferred the link between employer language and socialisation constructs, not expressed by participants, and the alignment is a post-hoc theoretical mapping.

Identifying a core set of competencies valued by both employers and students highlights ‘bridging competencies’: attributes valued across institutional logics that create points of convergence. In our data, communication, proactivity, fluent English, MS Excel proficiency, and teamwork appeared in both groups’ priorities, indicating a shared core across the academic-market divide. Large-scale Polish survey data support their cross-institutional relevance, similarly pointing to social competencies as the most consistently demanded attributes across sectors and employer types (Jelonek *et al.*, 2019). These bridging competencies can function as boundary-spanning elements linking academic and market logics, providing a practical basis for curricular interventions that address the structural gap without wholesale institutional transformation (Gold, 2024). These findings extend person-environment fit theory by showing that curriculum design is a structural factor shaping graduates’ initial person-job fit in MNCs.

CONCLUSIONS

The study indicated that the divergence between employer and student competence priorities shows a structurally embedded phenomenon sustained by the different informational bases upon which educational credentialing and employer selection operate. This analysis makes three contributions. Firstly, it identifies the competence-logic misalignment as a mechanism that more parsimoniously explains the persistent employability gap than existing descriptive accounts. The framework clarifies why the gap endures despite awareness (it is reproduced by institutional logics rather than information deficits) and why experience asymmetry between employers and students is not self-correcting (the academic logic systematically underweights experiential information beyond its credentialing remit). Secondly, it extends the person-environment fit theory by including curriculum design as a structural conditioning factor in the person-job fit, linking macro-level institutional dynamics to micro-level socialisation outcomes and enriching employability and organisational socialisation literatures. This propositional contribution – pending quantitative validation – specifies a testable pathway from educational structures to adjustment outcomes not previously examined in the person-environment fit research. Thirdly, by treating the data as a pre-transformation baseline (between the COVID-19 and generative AI disruptions) it provides a theoretical reference point specifying which dimensions future studies should track and why divergence should widen, rather than a statistical benchmark.

The findings indicate a dual intervention strategy. For universities, the priority is not adding stand-alone soft skills modules but building competence literacy, helping students understand the different logics shaping employment in complex organisations. Soft skills are hard to teach because the academic logic lacks robust ways to assess and credential them, which helps explain why decades of employer feedback have yielded little curricular reform. A more promising intervention helps students and educators grasp the different competence logics in the labour market, so graduates can deliberately develop dispositional competencies that credentials do not signal. For MNC employers, recruitment communication should bridge the logic gap by describing role behaviours in terms that graduates shaped by academic logic can understand and use. For policymakers, the persistence of this gap despite long-standing awareness shows that information campaigns are insufficient; structural incentives that reward institutions for developing and certifying dispositional competencies, including alternative credentials and competency-based assessment systems, may be needed to shift the institutional equilibrium.

The main limitation comes from the study’s geographic and sectoral specificity: data from GBS employers and students in Krakow, Poland and the findings may reflect the local educational context, the specific features of the Polish GBS sector, and Krakow’s labour market culture, all of which may differ across other Polish cities, Central-Eastern European regions, and other MNC contexts (Geodecki, 2021). Further limits include the qualitative design, which provides depth but not statistical generalisability, and the sample of 28 participants in four focus groups, which prevents representativeness claims. The four-group design likewise does not support thematic saturation, though this bounds generalisability rather than the internal coherence of the observed contrast. Finally, the lack of post-2022

data – though reframed as a baseline – means the theorised intensification of misalignment remains a hypothesis rather than an established finding.

We propose three directions for future research. Firstly, longitudinal or repeated cross-sectional studies could test whether competence logic misalignment has widened since generative AI adoption. Cross-context replication across different educational systems and stages of sector maturity therefore offers a direct test of the model's scope. Secondly, cross-location comparisons of GBS sites with different educational systems could test the boundary conditions of the institutional logics model. Thirdly, quantitatively operationalising bridging competencies – examining whether competencies valued across institutional logics predict superior person-environment fit and socialisation outcomes – would rigorously test the model's practical implications.

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The contribution share of authors is equal and amounted to ⅓ for each of them.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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