

Socio-emotional Competencies and the Development of Employability in Higher Arts Education: Evidence From a Romanian Case Study¹

DOI : 10.46522/S.2026.01.1

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Abstract: *Recent transformations in the labor market have highlighted the importance of socio-emotional competencies as key determinants of employability and sustainable career development. Despite their growing relevance, relatively little research has examined these competencies within the context of higher arts education. Characterized by occupational mobility, interdisciplinary collaboration, and often discontinuous career pathways, higher arts education increasingly plays a strategic role in fostering competencies that extend beyond disciplinary expertise. This study investigates how students in theatre and performing arts programmers perceive the development of socio-emotional competencies during their university education and how they assess the relevance of these competencies for labor market integration. A mixed-methods research design was adopted, combining a quantitative analysis of questionnaire data collected from a sample of 72 students with a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussions. The findings indicate that adaptability and flexibility ($M = 3.96$), critical and reflective thinking ($M = 3.85$), creativity and innovation ($M = 3.79$), and effective communication ($M = 3.75$) received the highest ratings, whereas resilience and stress management ($M = 3.21$) together with leadership and initiative ($M = 3.29$) emerged as the least developed socio-emotional competencies. The qualitative evidence further suggests that these competencies are acquired primarily through implicit learning processes embedded in collaborative and practice-based educational experiences rather than through explicit curricular interventions. The study therefore highlights the close relationship between socio-emotional competencies and sustainable employability in higher arts education. Building on these findings, it proposes several curricular directions aimed at strengthening graduates' professional preparation and their capacity to respond effectively to the evolving demands of a contemporary artistic career.*

Key words: *socio-emotional competencies; employability; higher arts education; transferable competencies; sustainable employability; Romanian case study.*

¹ This research was carried out within the framework of the project *UAT's Next? II – Internship Programmes for Students in Cluj-Napoca and Târgu Mureş* (Project Code: PEO/312496).



1. Introduction

1.1. Research Context

The economic, technological, digital, cultural, social, and educational transformations of the past two decades have profoundly reshaped the labor market, particularly with regard to the expectations that employers place on university graduates, especially those pursuing careers in the arts. Consequently, within this dynamic and continuously evolving context, the emphasis has gradually shifted from the acquisition of technical expertise and disciplinary knowledge towards the development of transversal and socio-emotional competencies. This shift reflects the growing need to prepare graduates to adapt effectively to increasingly complex and fluid professional environments. International organizations such as the OECD, UNESCO, and the European Commission have consistently highlighted the importance of competencies such as adaptability, critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, resilience and leadership, recognizing them as essential resources that enable individuals to respond to contemporary professional challenges and to pursue sustainable career pathways. Nevertheless, the role of these competencies within higher arts education and their contribution to graduate employability remain insufficiently explored in existing literature.

Socio-emotional competencies play a particularly significant part in the arts and creative sectors, where professional careers are considerably less predictable than in many other fields of activity. Artistic practice – especially in the performing arts – is largely organized around temporary projects that require interdisciplinary collaboration and the ability to navigate a wide variety of professional roles and contexts in response to constantly evolving artistic, social, cultural and institutional demands. Consequently, professional success depends not only on discipline-specific artistic expertise but also (and often more importantly), on the development of competencies that support collaboration, effective communication, professional autonomy, and the capacity to manage uncertainty within diverse creative environments.

The literature increasingly emphasizes that higher education institutions are expected to incorporate objectives that extend beyond the traditional university mission into their strategic and operational agendas. Alongside the transmission of disciplinary knowledge, universities are now expected to foster broader competencies that support both graduates' professional integration and their active participation in society. Against this background, the concept of *employability* has become central to debates on higher education and graduate transition towards the labor market. Employability refers to an individual's capacity not only to obtain employment but also to sustain and further develop a professional career by effectively mobilizing acquired competencies within increasingly unstable and rapidly changing labor markets. One of the most influential definitions describes employability as "the continuous fulfilling, acquiring or creating of work through the optimal use of competences" (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006, p. 453).



More recently, Fleuren (2024) conceptualizes employability as the outcome of interactions between individual resources, organizational practices and labor market dynamics. The author also cautions against placing sole responsibility for professional success on individuals while overlooking the structural constraints that shape employment opportunities. From this understanding, the concept of *sustainable employability* is proposed as a shared responsibility among individuals, organizations and society, being aimed at protecting people's health, well-being and dignity throughout their professional lives (Fleuren, 2024, pp. 200–202). This perspective is particularly relevant to the arts, where graduates' career trajectories are rarely linear and long-term professional success depends largely on their capacity to adapt continuously to changing occupational contexts.

In the context of arts education – and particularly theatre education – the issues outlined above garner particular significance. Graduates of undergraduate and master's programmers in the performing arts frequently encounter atypical patterns of employment, requiring an increased capacity to adjust to increasingly fragmented career paths in which discipline-specific artistic expertise must be complemented by organizational, entrepreneurial and interpersonal competencies. Consequently, examining socio-emotional competencies becomes strategically important, as it enables a contextualized understanding of their role in identifying directions for the further development of educational provision.

The present study builds upon the findings generated through Activity SA3.1 – *Identifying Horizontal Needs for the Development of Educational Provision*, implemented within the project *UAT's Next? II – Internship Programmes for Students in Cluj-Napoca and Târgu Mureș*. Its primary objective is to explore how students perceive the development of socio-emotional competencies throughout their artistic higher education and how these competencies contribute to their integration into the labor market for performing arts professionals. The research is based on the analysis of data collected from a sample of 72 students and on the integration of feedback obtained during academic discussions involving both students and academic staff. By combining these sources of evidence, the study provides an empirical perspective on the relationship between arts education – particularly in the field of the performing arts – and the development of competencies regarded as essential for contemporary professional practice. In doing so, it contributes to the growing body of scholarship on higher arts education while also informing future directions regarding curriculum development.

1.2. Research Problem

Against the backdrop of increasingly profound transformations in the contemporary labor market, socio-emotional competencies have become a key determinant of graduates' professional development. They are widely recognized as essential factors that support both successful labor market integration and the development of sustainable career trajectories. The literature consistently highlights the six competencies examined in the present study – adaptability, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, resilience and leadership – as influential predictors of professional performance, career success



and individuals' capacity to respond effectively to technological, organizational, social, and cultural change (Fugate & Kinicki, 2008; Robinson, 2006; Kossek & Perrigino, 2016; Andrews & Higson, 2008, p. 418). Consequently, fostering these competencies has become a priority for higher education institutions, as well as for governmental and non-governmental organizations seeking to enhance graduate employability.

Despite the broad recognition of the importance of socio-emotional competencies, relatively few studies have explicitly examined how they are developed through higher arts education. Most existing research focuses on the general benefits associated with participation in artistic activities, while paying comparatively limited attention to the educational mechanisms through which university-level arts education contributes to the development of socio-emotional competencies (Mullen, 2023; Bocanegra-Valle et al., 2021; Zhang, 2025). Addressing this gap is particularly important for understanding artistic education within professional environments characterized by diversity, flexibility and continuous change. Graduates in the arts frequently pursue independent, project-based, temporary and interdisciplinary careers, which require high levels of adaptability, artistic autonomy and social agency. In such contexts, socio-emotional competencies become an integral component of professional artistic training and play a fundamental role in facilitating both employability and long-term professional development.

Building upon these considerations, the present study investigates how students enrolled in theatre and performing arts programmers perceive the development of socio-emotional competencies throughout their university education, with a particular emphasis on the formal curriculum. It also explores the perceived relevance of these competencies for graduates' transition into the labor market. More specifically, the study seeks to identify which socio-emotional competencies are effectively fostered through existing study programmers and which require further curricular attention and reinforcement in order to improve educational provision.

The significance of this research is both theoretical and practical. From a theoretical perspective, it contributes to the growing body of scholarship on socio-emotional competencies, employability and arts education. From a practical perspective, it provides evidence-based directions for enhancing university curricula and educational practices in ways that better prepare graduates for the demands of contemporary professional environments. Accordingly, the study draws upon empirical evidence to address a series of questions concerning the relationship between arts education and the development of competencies required for active participation in the labor market, sustainable employability and successful adaptation to the constantly shifting demands of professional practice.

1.3. Research Objectives

Building upon the growing recognition of the role of socio-emotional competencies in enhancing graduate employability, as well as the specific characteristics of higher education programmers in the arts – particularly those in theatre and the performing arts – the present study aims to examine students' perceptions of the development of the competen-



cies that support their successful transition into the labor market. To achieve this objective, the study draws upon the findings generated through Activity SA3.1 of the UAT's Next? II project and integrates the results of both quantitative and qualitative analyses of data collected through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups.

The overall objective of the study is to analyse students' perceptions of the development of socio-emotional competencies within undergraduate and master's programmers in higher arts education and to evaluate the perceived relevance of these competencies for graduates' employability.

More specifically, the study pursues the following objectives:

1. To identify the main socio-emotional competencies developed through undergraduate and master's programmers in higher arts education, based on the perceptions of the students participating in the study.
2. To examine differences among the various categories of socio-emotional competencies, highlighting those that most effectively support professional integration and labor market participation, as well as those perceived as being less developed.
3. To assess the relevance of socio-emotional competencies for graduates' employability and their capacity to adjust to the demands of the labor market in the arts and cultural sectors.
4. To analyse the relationship between students' educational experiences and the development of socio-emotional competencies considered essential for employability and sustainable career development.
5. To propose directions for the further development of higher education curricula, informed by the empirical findings and the needs identified through the present research.

Through these objectives, the study seeks to contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the field of higher arts education by clarifying the role of socio-emotional competencies in graduate employability and by providing evidence-based recommendations to support higher education institutions in aligning their study programmers with the evolving demands of the contemporary workforce market.

1.4. Research Questions

In line with the research objectives, as well as with the current challenges facing higher arts education and the dynamic and evolving context in which arts universities operate, the present study seeks to address a set of research questions aimed at examining how students perceive the development of socio-emotional competencies throughout undergraduate and master's programmers and how they evaluate the relevance of these competencies for professional integration and career development. The research is grounded in the premise that an artist's professional success depends not only on discipline-specific expertise but also on their ability to adapt to diverse professional contexts, collaborate effectively and respond constructively to the challenges of the contemporary arts sector.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:



1. Which socio-emotional competencies do students perceive as being the most effectively developed through higher arts education programmers?

This question seeks to identify the competencies that students perceive as having reached the highest levels of development and that they associate with the educational experiences provided through study programmers and course curricula.

2. Which socio-emotional competencies are perceived as being insufficiently developed?

This question aims to identify the competencies that students perceive as receiving less support during their university education and that may indicate the need for curricular enhancement or reveal educational opportunities that remain insufficiently exploited within arts education.

3. To what extent are socio-emotional competencies perceived as relevant to professional integration and career development in the arts?

This question explores the relationship between socio-emotional competencies and the perceived demands of the workforce market, with particular attention to those competencies considered essential for employability and long term career development.

4. What is the relationship between educational experiences and the development of socio-emotional competencies?

This question examines how different components of higher arts education – including curricular and extracurricular activities, internships and participation in artistic and cultural projects – contribute to the development of the competencies investigated in this study.

5. What implications do the research findings have for the further development of educational provision in theatre and performing arts education?

This question addresses the applied dimension of the study by identifying directions for curriculum development that may strengthen the relationship between university education and the contemporary professional environment in the arts.

Taken together, these research questions form the basis of an empirical investigation that seeks to provide an integrated understanding of the role of socio-emotional competencies in higher arts education and their contribution to graduates' employability and long-term professional development.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. The Concept of Socio-Emotional Competencies

The concept of *socio-emotional competencies* has undergone significant development over the past decades, reflecting the growing interest in the factors that influence not only educational quality and performance but also individuals' professional integration and social engagement. Whereas traditional educational models associated academic and professional success primarily with cognitive abilities and discipline-specific knowledge, recent research has increasingly highlighted the importance of competencies



such as adaptability, teamwork, self-regulation, resilience, empathy and the capacity to make informed decisions across diverse contexts.

One of the most influential contributions to the conceptualization of socio-emotional competencies has been made by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The OECD defines these competencies as individual patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving that can be developed through education and learning experiences in order to achieve personal, educational and professional goals. These competencies are regarded as key determinants of lifelong socio-economic outcomes (OECD, 2015, p. 35). From such an approach, socio-emotional competencies extend beyond stable personality traits and are understood as dynamic resources that enable individuals to interact effectively with both social and professional environments. More recent OECD publications further emphasize that the development of socio-emotional competencies constitutes a prerequisite for educational success, career development, and social well-being, highlighting the need to integrate them explicitly into educational policies and curriculum design (OECD, 2024).

Another major contribution to the advancement of this field has been made by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), which developed the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) framework. According to this model, socio-emotional competencies are organized around five core domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020). These domains are considered fundamental not only for individuals' personal development but also for the effective functioning of groups and communities, as well as for successful adaptation to diverse social and professional contexts.

As emphasized in the CASEL framework:

Students, families, schools, and communities are part of broader systems that shape learning, development, and life experiences. Inequities based on race, ethnicity, social class, language, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other factors are deeply embedded within many of these systems and influence the social, emotional, and academic learning of both young people and adults. Although Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) alone cannot resolve historical and structural inequities within education systems, it can create the conditions that enable individuals and schools to critically examine and disrupt inequitable policies and practices, foster more inclusive learning environments, and identify, nurture, and build upon the strengths and assets of all individuals.

CASEL, 2020, p. 4

The CASEL model has become one of the most widely adopted conceptual frameworks for socio-emotional learning internationally and has substantially influenced both educational research and curriculum development. By framing socio-emotional competencies as learnable and measurable capacities rather than innate



personal characteristics, it provides a robust theoretical foundation for analyzing their role in higher education and graduate employability.

Heckman and Kautz (2012, 2013) have also made a significant contribution to the understanding of the importance of socio-emotional competencies. Their research demonstrates that professional success and social recognition cannot be explained solely by cognitive abilities measured through standardized tests. Instead, they identify a range of non-cognitive factors – including perseverance, self-control, motivation, responsibility, and the ability to collaborate – that substantially influence both educational achievement and professional performance. Accordingly, socio-emotional competencies are regarded as a form of human capital that plays a decisive role in employability and long-term career development.

UNESCO, in turn, has incorporated socio-emotional competencies into a broader vision of education centred on sustainable development and global citizenship. Its policy documents emphasize that contemporary education should extend beyond the transmission of knowledge to foster equally important capacities such as collaboration, empathy, critical reflection, and responsible participation in society. More recent UNESCO publications further reaffirm that the education of the future should promote the holistic development of individuals by cultivating competencies that enhance adaptability, collaboration, and responsible engagement in societies characterized by rapid and continuous change (UNESCO, 2024). Accordingly, socio-emotional competencies are regarded as essential resources for managing the challenges of both social and professional life and for responding effectively to the complexities of an increasingly diverse and rapidly changing world.

Despite the conceptual differences among the theoretical models proposed by various organizations and scholars, they all converge on the view that the development of socio-emotional competencies constitutes a fundamental dimension of contemporary education. Within the context of higher arts education, these competencies assume particular importance, as they are closely associated with academic and artistic achievement.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives demonstrate that socio-emotional competencies should not be understood merely as individual personality traits but rather as dynamic resources that can be cultivated through educational experiences. They influence academic performance, professional integration, and individuals' capacity to adapt to changing labor market conditions. Consequently, socio-emotional competencies should be regarded as an integral component of the educational mission of higher arts institutions.

2.2. Socio-Emotional Competencies and Employability

The concept of *employability* occupies a central position in literature examining the relationship between higher education and the labor market. Employability is no longer understood merely as the ability to secure employment upon graduation; rather, it is increasingly conceptualized as a complex capacity that enables individuals to identify, access, sustain, and capitalize on professional opportunities throughout their careers.



From this perspective, socio-emotional competencies play a pivotal role in professional adaptation and the development of sustainable careers.

A widely cited definition of employability is that proposed by Yorke (2006), who describes it as a set of achievements – including skills, knowledge, understanding, and personal attributes – that increase graduates' likelihood of obtaining employment and achieving professional success. Yorke further argues that literature offers several complementary ways of conceptualizing employability. It may be understood as a measurable outcome of labor market integration, reflected in graduates' ability to secure employment; as a process of personal and professional development taking place throughout higher education; or as the combination of competencies, achievements, and potential that enhances an individual's capacity to succeed in the labor market (Yorke, 2006, p. 6). This perspective shifts the emphasis from formal qualifications towards recognizing the importance of personal attributes and transferable competencies. Consequently, employability can be derived from the interaction between discipline-specific expertise and individuals' ability to mobilize their competencies effectively across diverse professional contexts.

Along similar lines, Knight and Yorke (2004) developed the *USEM model (Understanding, Skills, Efficacy Beliefs and Metacognition)*, which remains one of the most influential theoretical frameworks for understanding graduate employability. Although introduced more than two decades ago, the model continues to provide a valuable conceptual foundation by demonstrating that professional success depends not only on the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge and technical skills but also on the holistic development of the individual. In particular, it emphasizes self-efficacy, reflective learning, and the capacity to transfer acquired competencies to new and unfamiliar situations. Within this framework, socio-emotional competencies – including adaptability, collaboration, self-regulation, and resilience – are regarded as fundamental dimensions of employability.

Tomlinson (2017) further expanded the concept by emphasizing its multidimensional and contextual nature. He argues that employability should not be viewed simply as the accumulation of individual competencies but rather as a dynamic construct shaped by labor market conditions, available opportunities, structural constraints, and the ways in which individuals construct their professional identities. Consequently, socio-emotional competencies play a crucial role in facilitating career transitions, adapting to change, and developing flexible career trajectories. More recent work by Jackson and Tomlinson (2022) extends this perspective by demonstrating that professional success increasingly depends on graduates' ability to develop coherent professional identities and to mobilize socio-emotional competencies effectively across diverse occupational contexts.

A complementary perspective is provided by Jackson (2014), who examines the competencies most highly valued by employers, highlighting the importance of communication, collaboration, initiative, problem-solving, and adaptability. Jackson argues that employers are concerned not only with graduates' professional expertise but also with their socio-emotional competencies, which are often considered even more



valuable than discipline-specific technical skills. Consequently, the development of these competencies should be regarded as a shared responsibility of both students and higher education institutions. Furthermore, the distinction between academic competencies and those associated with employability is increasingly recognized as artificial. In this regard, Jackson argues that the development of transversal competencies should constitute an explicit objective of higher education programmers, as these competencies facilitate graduates' transition into the labor market and their adaptation to complex professional environments (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021).

Overall, the literature consistently emphasizes that employability can no longer be reduced to the possession of technical or discipline-specific competencies alone. Rather, it depends on the integration of specialized knowledge with a broad range of socio-emotional and transversal competencies that enable graduates to respond flexibly to the demands of professional environments characterized by continuous change.

Increasingly, the concept of *employability* is being complemented – or even replaced – by that of *sustainable employability*, which extends beyond the objective of immediate labor market entry to encompass individuals' capacity to maintain their health, well-being, and active participation in working life over the long term. Within this perspective, socio-emotional competencies acquire particular significance by fostering resilience, professional autonomy, and the capacity to adapt to shifting occupational environments (Fleuren, 2024, pp. 200–201).

In the context of arts education, the relationship between socio-emotional competencies and employability is especially significant. Graduates of higher arts education institutions typically pursue careers in professional environments characterized by uncertainty, mobility, and diversity, all of which require a broad repertoire of competencies. Professional success is therefore determined not only by artistic expertise but also by individuals' ability to collaborate effectively, initiate and manage projects, cope with challenging situations, and respond constructively to the diverse demands of contemporary professional practice. For these reasons, socio-emotional competencies should be regarded as strategic resources for enhancing employability and supporting sustainable careers in the arts and creative sectors.

2.3. The Specificity of Arts Education and the Development of Transversal Competencies

Within higher education, arts education occupies a distinctive position owing to the specific nature of its pedagogical processes and the range of competencies it seeks to cultivate in future graduates. Unlike educational models that focus primarily on the transmission of theoretical knowledge and the acquisition of discipline-specific technical skills, arts education engages a considerably broader set of learning processes by integrating cognitive, emotional, social, and creative dimensions into a complex process of personal and professional development. Consequently, arts education



provides a particularly favorable environment for the integrated development of transversal and socio-emotional competencies.

Elliot W. Eisner (2002) is among the scholars who have made a major contribution to understanding the distinctive educational value of the arts in fostering specific forms of thinking and perception. He argues that arts education cultivates cognitive flexibility, critical reflection, and interpretative capacity. Artistic experience enables students to learn how to operate effectively in situations characterized by novelty, ambiguity, and complexity by accepting the existence of multiple possible solutions and by developing the ability to make informed decisions even when clear, predetermined or unique answers are unavailable. In one of his best-known formulations, Eisner argues that education is, above all, the process of learning to create ourselves and that experience is the medium of education (Eisner, 2002, p. 3). Within this framework, arts education responds directly to the evolving demands of contemporary labor markets, which increasingly value adaptability, creativity, and independent thinking. The arts should therefore be understood not as a luxury within education but as an essential means of cultivating individuals capable of responding effectively to the complexity of contemporary society.

Regarding the development of transversal competencies, Anne Bamford (2006) emphasizes the significant contribution of arts education by demonstrating that participation in artistic and creative activities promotes not only collaboration and communication but also self-confidence and problem-solving abilities. Based on a comparative analysis of educational systems across numerous countries, Bamford concludes that the impact of arts education extends well beyond artistic achievement itself, generating broader benefits for participants' personal and social development.

Similarly, Ruth Bridgstock (2009) examines the relationship between arts education and employability, arguing, in turn, that professional success in the creative and cultural industries depends on a set of competencies that extends far beyond discipline-specific expertise. She maintains that contemporary artists must develop the capacity to manage their careers, build professional networks, initiate projects, and identify opportunities within professional environments characterized by flexibility, uncertainty, and intense competition. Consequently, socio-emotional and entrepreneurial competencies emerge as essential determinants of employability and successful adaptation to ongoing technological, organizational, and social change. Bridgstock further identifies several personal characteristics and dispositions that support employability, including openness to experience, self-confidence, initiative, sociability, intrinsic motivation, and career self-efficacy (Bridgstock, 2009, pp. 36–37).

Finally, a similar perspective is advanced by Dawn Bennett (2016), who emphasizes the importance of professional identity and adaptability in graduates' transition from higher education to the labor market. Bennett argues that graduates in the arts are frequently required to navigate non-linear career pathways by combining multiple professional roles throughout their careers. Consequently, competencies such as resilience,



autonomy, collaboration, and leadership become essential for enabling graduates to build and sustain successful professional careers.

Taken together, these theoretical contributions suggest that arts education should not be evaluated solely in terms of the artistic competencies acquired by graduates but also in terms of its capacity to foster transversal competencies that are essential for professional integration. Adaptability, creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, resilience, and leadership are not merely complementary abilities developed during artistic training; rather, they constitute fundamental components of graduates' professional profiles. Consequently, the analysis of socio-emotional competencies serves not only to inform the development of higher education curricula that are better aligned with market needs, but also to enhance our understanding of how universities can – and should – prepare students for professional environments characterized by continuous change.

Within this context, higher arts education can be regarded as a particularly favorable environment for the development of socio-emotional competencies. Artistic creation – and especially theatre and performing arts practice – necessarily involves collaboration, self-reflection, emotional regulation, risk-taking, and adaptation to complex and dynamic situations. However, the literature also suggests that these competencies are typically developed implicitly through artistic practice rather than being explicitly articulated as learning outcomes or systematically assessed within higher education curricula. This observation provides an important point of departure for the present study, which seeks to examine how students perceive the development of socio-emotional competencies throughout their artistic education and the extent to which these competencies contribute to their employability.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The present study adopted a *mixed-methods research design*, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to obtain an integrated understanding of the development of socio-emotional competencies and their relevance to the employability of undergraduate and master's students enrolled in various theatre and performing arts programmes. The methodological approach was guided by the principle of *methodological triangulation*, whereby evidence obtained from multiple data sources was systematically integrated to enhance the validity of the findings and to enable their interpretation from complementary perspectives.

The quantitative component consisted of a standardized questionnaire, while the qualitative component included semi-structured interviews and focus groups involving students, academic staff, and representatives of the professional arts sector. Integrating these sources of evidence made it possible both to identify general patterns and to gain a deeper understanding of the mechanisms underlying the quantitative findings. Accordingly, the study was not designed to test causal relationships but rather to



provide a descriptive and exploratory analysis of the development of socio-emotional competencies within higher arts education.

The adoption of a mixed-methods approach was justified by the need to capture both the descriptive characteristics of the analyzed phenomenon and the meanings participants attributed to their educational experiences. Consequently, the integration of quantitative and qualitative data provided a holistic perspective on the relationship between socio-emotional competencies and employability.

3.2. Participants

A convenience sample of 72 students ($N = 72$) voluntarily participated in the study by completing the research instruments. Prior to data collection, all participants signed participation forms and informed consent documents authorizing audio recording and the processing of their data exclusively for scientific research and statistical analysis. All data were treated as strictly confidential, anonymized in all reports and publications, and were not used for any purpose other than those explicitly stated in the consent forms.

Participants were selected in accordance with the objectives of the study, which sought to investigate students' perceptions of the relevance of higher arts education and the development of socio-emotional competencies required for professional integration. The study also incorporated qualitative evidence generated through focus groups and academic discussions involving both students and academic staff during the validation phase of the preliminary findings. These additional data contributed to the contextualization of the results and to a more nuanced interpretation of the research findings.

3.3. Research Instruments

Data was collected using *three complementary research instruments*.

a) Questionnaire

The primary research instrument was a *standardized questionnaire* designed to assess students' perceptions of the relevance of their study programmes and of the extent to which socio-emotional competencies had been developed throughout their university education.

The questionnaire included items addressing communication, teamwork, adaptability, critical thinking, resilience, leadership, and emotional intelligence, as well as questions concerning internship experiences and students' perceptions of the relationship between university education and labor market requirements. In addition, the questionnaire incorporated items exploring the development of digital competencies and competencies related to sustainability and environmental responsibility.

b) Semi-Structured Interviews

To complement and contextualize the quantitative findings, *semi-structured interviews* were conducted with representatives of the professional performing arts sector. The interviews sought to explore employers' and industry professionals' expectations regarding graduates' professional profiles, the competencies considered essential for



successful job market integration, and the main gaps perceived between university education and the requirements of the contemporary labor market.

A structured *interview guide* was developed around several core themes, including graduates' professional profiles, the vocational and socio-emotional competencies required within the performing arts sector, the relevance of internship experiences, and the role of digital and sustainability-related competencies. The interviews also explored participants' recommendations for the further development of higher education programmers and curriculum design.

c) Focus Groups

To refine the qualitative analysis and strengthen the methodological triangulation of the findings, *two focus groups* were organized: one involving academic staff and another comprising students and graduates from the Theatre and Performing Arts programmers.

The focus groups were designed to validate and interpret the findings obtained through questionnaires and interviews while also providing a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions. Discussions were structured around four main thematic areas: (1) the relevance of educational provision; (2) the development of socio-emotional competencies; (3) digital and green competencies; and (4) proposals for curriculum development.

Particular attention was paid to the ways in which higher education institutions focused on the arts contribute to the development of competencies such as communication, empathy, creativity, teamwork, resilience and adaptability, as well as to the relationship between university education and the requirements of the contemporary professional arts sector.

The three research instruments were employed in a complementary manner within a *methodological triangulation* framework. The questionnaire provided an overview of general trends and students' perceived levels of competency development, whereas the semi-structured interviews and focus groups offered contextual explanations and more in-depth interpretations of the quantitative findings. The integration of evidence from all three sources strengthened the credibility of the findings through *convergent validation* and enabled the formulation of a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between higher arts education, socio-emotional competencies, and graduate employability.

3.4. Data Analysis

The quantitative data was analyzed using *descriptive statistical techniques*, in accordance with the study's mixed-methods research design. The analytical procedure followed a *sequential and convergent approach*, enabling the identification of general patterns across the sample while also facilitating an understanding of the meanings participants attributed to their educational and professional experiences.

The quantitative data collected through the questionnaire was processed using descriptive statistics. Absolute and relative frequencies, percentage distributions, means, and medians were calculated for the items related to socio-emotional competencies and the per-



ceived relevance of the educational provision. The combined use of means and medians made it possible to identify both the central tendency of the data and potential variations in participants' perceptions. Consequently, the statistical analysis was primarily exploratory and descriptive, focusing on identifying the profile of perceived socio-emotional competencies and the main differences across the dimensions which were investigated.

The qualitative data generated through the semi-structured interviews and focus groups were analyzed using thematic analysis, a well-established method in educational and social research for identifying recurrent patterns of meaning within participants' accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The analytical process involved familiarization with the empirical material, initial coding, the organization of codes into higher-order thematic categories, the review and refinement of themes, and the development of interpretative themes aligned with the objectives of the study. Throughout the analysis, particular attention was paid to participants' experiences, perceptions, contextual factors, and the relationships among the emerging themes, enabling the construction of an explanatory interpretation of the findings.

The analysis focused on themes related to the relevance of higher education programmes, the development of socio-emotional competencies, internship and professional practice experiences, the relationship between university education and market requirements, and recommendations for the further development of educational provision. The thematic categories were developed through a combination of deductive and inductive procedures. Deductive coding was guided by the research objectives and the structure of the research instruments, whereas inductive coding enabled the identification of emergent themes arising directly from participants' experiences and perspectives.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings was achieved through methodological triangulation, with particular attention paid to convergences, complementarities, and potential discrepancies across the three sources of evidence. This analytical strategy supported the validation of the interpretations and the formulation of evidence-based recommendations concerning the development of socio-emotional competencies and their relevance for graduate employability in the arts.

Rather than simply juxtaposing quantitative and qualitative findings, the analysis sought to integrate both forms of evidence into a coherent interpretative framework capable of capturing not only the statistical dimensions of the phenomenon which was investigated, but also the complexity of participants' experiences and perceptions.

Overall, the analytical strategy moved beyond a purely descriptive examination of the data towards an interpretative and explanatory understanding of the mechanisms through which educational experiences contribute to the development of socio-emotional competencies and support employability within the arts sector. To enhance the interpretative validity of the findings, the themes identified through the qualitative analysis were continuously compared with the quantitative evidence obtained through the questionnaire, with particular attention given to both convergent and divergent patterns across the different



data sources. This triangulation strategy strengthened the consistency of the interpretations and increased the overall credibility of the study's conclusions.

3.5. Methodological Limitations

The findings of this study should be interpreted with due caution in light of several methodological limitations inherent in exploratory research employing mixed methods approaches. These include the contextual nature of the data, the size and composition of the sample, and the challenges associated with integrating and generalizing findings derived from quantitative and qualitative methods (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

First, the quantitative data analyzed in this study are based on participants' self-reported perceptions. Consequently, the findings primarily reflect respondents' perceptions of the development of their socio-emotional competencies and the educational value of their learning experiences, rather than providing objective measures of actual competency levels or professional performance.

Second, the study was conducted with a convenience sample of 72 students enrolled in theatre and performing arts programmers. Although this sample enabled the identification of meaningful patterns within the investigated population, the findings should not be generalized to the broader population of students in higher arts education without appropriate caution.

Third, the descriptive and exploratory nature of the research design does not permit causal inferences. While the methodology allows for the identification of patterns and differences among socio-emotional competencies, it cannot establish causal relationships or determine the direct impact of specific educational factors on competency development.

Fourth, participants' perceived levels of competency development may have been influenced by individual and contextual factors that were beyond the scope of the present investigation, including prior professional experience, participation in extracurricular activities, characteristics of participants' social environments, and differences in their educational trajectories.

Finally, the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings inevitably involves a degree of interpretative judgement. To minimize this risk, explicit integration criteria were employed, focusing on the recurrence of themes, convergence across data sources, and their relevance to the research objectives. Interpretations were therefore grounded in the available empirical evidence, avoiding extrapolations that extended beyond the data.

Despite these limitations, the findings remain robust and meaningful. The integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence, together with the convergence of findings derived from questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups, strengthens the analytical consistency of the study and enhances the credibility of its conclusions.



4. Results

4.1. Profile of Socio-Emotional Competencies

The competency profile emerging from the data analysis highlights both the principal strengths of higher arts education and the dimensions that require further development. To achieve this, the interpretation of the findings integrated descriptive statistical analyses with qualitative evidence obtained from the semi-structured interviews and focus groups. This combined approach enabled a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms through which socio-emotional competencies are developed within higher education programmers.

The analysis reveals a relatively balanced socio-emotional competency profile among students enrolled in theatre and performing arts programmers. Overall, the findings indicate high levels of perceived development in competencies related to adaptability, critical thinking, and creativity, whereas comparatively lower levels were identified for resilience and leadership.

4.2. The Most Highly Developed Competencies

The findings identify a core group of socio-emotional competencies that students perceive as being highly developed throughout their university education. The highest mean scores were recorded for *adaptability and flexibility* ($M = 3.96$), *critical and reflective thinking* ($M = 3.85$), *creativity and innovation* ($M = 3.79$), *effective communication* ($M = 3.75$), and *empathy and emotional intelligence* ($M = 3.71$). Taken together, these findings suggest a competency profile characterized by adaptability, critical reflection, creativity and interpersonal interaction – dimensions that are closely aligned with the distinctive characteristics of contemporary arts education.

Among all the competencies which were surveyed, *adaptability and flexibility* received the highest evaluations. This finding can be explained by the distinctive characteristics of artistic education, which continually expose students to new situations, requires the reinterpretation of diverse contexts, and demands the capacity to respond rapidly to changing perspectives and working methods. Throughout their artistic training, students are frequently required to manage uncertainty, experiment with alternative approaches, and revise initial solutions in response to the evolving dynamics of the creative process. In this context, adaptability should not be regarded merely as a complementary competency but rather as one of the fundamental conditions of artistic practice. This interpretation is further supported by the focus-group discussions, in which participants consistently identified versatility and adaptability as among the most valuable outcomes of their university education.

A similarly high level of perceived development was observed for *critical and reflective thinking*. Arts education inherently involves continuous processes of analysis, interpretation, and evaluation, requiring students to formulate independent perspectives and to reassess their creative choices throughout the educational process. Consequently, critical thinking emerges as a direct outcome of pedagogical practices characteristic of



arts education. Both students and academic staff associated this competency with the development of intellectual autonomy and the capacity to generate creative responses to complex problems.

Creativity and innovation likewise occupy a central position within the competency profile identified in this study. This finding is fully consistent with the very nature of arts education, which encourages exploration, experimentation, and the production of original solutions. Unlike many other fields of study, where creativity may represent a complementary competency, in theatre and the performing arts it constitutes one of the defining dimensions of the educational process itself. The high levels of self-assessment observed in this study suggest that students perceive the university environment as one that actively supports the development of individual expression and artistic innovation.

Similar findings were observed for *effective communication, collaboration, and empathy*. Although these competencies did not receive the highest scores, the results indicate consistently high levels of perceived development. The collaborative nature of most artistic activities provides a favorable context for the development of interpersonal relationships and teamwork. Participants in the focus groups repeatedly emphasized that stage productions, rehearsals and collaborative projects contributed substantially to the development of communication skills, active listening, and the ability to understand and appreciate the perspectives of others.

These findings are further supported by the semi-structured interviews, in which representatives of the professional arts sector identified adaptability, communication, collaboration, and critical reflection as among the most important competencies for successful professional integration and career development in the arts. From their perspective, professional success depends to a considerable extent on graduates' ability to function effectively within collaborative environments and to respond flexibly to professional contexts characterized by continuous change.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that higher arts education programmes make a substantial contribution to the development of socio-emotional competencies associated with creativity, adaptability and critical reflection. These competencies constitute the core of the competency profile identified in this study and represent key resources for graduate employability and long-term professional development. The findings further indicate that a higher education pertaining to the arts sector provides favorable conditions for developing these competencies, although the process occurs predominantly through implicit learning embedded in educational experiences and collaborative artistic practice rather than through explicitly designed curricular interventions targeting socio-emotional competency development.

4.3. Underdeveloped Competencies

In contrast to the high levels of perceived development observed for adaptability, critical thinking and creativity, the analysis also identified several socio-emotional competencies that students perceived as being less well developed. The lowest mean



scores were recorded for *resilience and stress management* ($M = 3.21$) and *leadership and initiative* ($M = 3.29$), making these the least developed dimensions within the competency profile identified in the study.

The contrast between these competencies and those occupying the highest positions in the ranking suggests an uneven pattern of socio-emotional competency development. Whereas adaptability and creativity appear to be fostered naturally through the distinctive characteristics of artistic education, competencies such as resilience and leadership seem to require more structured educational contexts and explicit opportunities for practice and reflection. In the absence of dedicated pedagogical interventions, their development remains more strongly dependent on students' individual experiences and on learning opportunities encountered beyond the formal curriculum.

The findings concerning *resilience and stress management* are particularly significant in the context of artistic professions. Employment within the cultural and creative sectors is frequently characterized by intense competition, occupational instability, continuous public evaluation, and a considerable degree of professional uncertainty. Under these conditions, the ability to cope with failure, manage pressure, and sustain long-term motivation becomes an essential resource for developing a sustainable career.

The qualitative findings reinforce this interpretation. During the focus-group discussions, participants repeatedly emphasized the challenges associated with the transition from university to professional practice, linking professional success not only to artistic talent but also to the ability to cope with uncertainty and the distinctive challenges of the arts sector. Several participants described the professional arts environment as a highly competitive and unpredictable one, where emotional adaptability is considered just as important as artistic expertise.

A similar pattern emerged with regard to *leadership and initiative*. Although artistic practice frequently involves coordinating projects and assuming organizational responsibilities, the findings indicate that students do not perceive these competencies as being developed to the same extent as creativity or collaboration. This may be explained by the fact that most educational experiences emphasize participation in collective artistic projects, whereas opportunities to lead teams, manage projects and make strategic decisions are considerably less common.

However, the semi-structured interviews with representatives of the professional arts sector highlighted the strategic importance of these competencies. Employers and practitioners consistently emphasized that professional success increasingly depends on graduates' ability to initiate projects, coordinate teams, establish professional partnerships, and manage resources effectively. This indicates that leadership should not be understood solely as a managerial attribute but rather as a competency that is essential for professionals working in sectors characterized by autonomy, project-based work, and occupational mobility.



An important finding of the study is that the comparatively lower levels of perceived resilience and leadership are not interpreted by participants as evidence of shortcomings in higher education programmers. Rather, they are viewed as a consequence of the implicit nature of their development. Both students and academic staff agreed that many socio-emotional competencies are acquired indirectly through internships, artistic projects and professional interactions rather than being explicitly embedded within the formal curriculum as intended learning outcomes.

Taken together, these results indicate that *resilience, stress management, leadership, and initiative* constitute the principal areas for further development within the competency profile identified in this study. Their importance is widely recognized by both students and professionals working in the arts sector; however, the current educational approaches do not appear to support their systematic development. These findings point to the need for curricular and extracurricular initiatives that complement the spontaneous development of socio-emotional competencies by providing students with explicit opportunities to develop leadership, strengthen resilience and acquire effective strategies for managing professional challenges.

4.4. Implicit versus Explicit Development of Socio-Emotional Competencies

One of the most significant findings of this study concerns the manner in which socio-emotional competencies are developed within higher arts education. The integrated analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data indicates that these competencies are perceived as both relevant and, in many cases, well developed. However, their development occurs predominantly through *implicit learning processes*, rather than being systematically supported through explicit curricular objectives, dedicated learning activities, or formal assessment mechanisms. This finding emerged consistently across the semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and academic discussions.

Participants repeatedly emphasized that the development of socio-emotional competencies is primarily associated with everyday educational experiences, interactions between students and academic staff, participation in artistic projects and collaborative learning activities. In other words, these competencies are perceived not as the outcome of explicitly designed pedagogical interventions but rather as a natural by-product of the overall process of artistic education.

During the focus-group discussions, students consistently reported that skills such as adaptability, communication, empathy and teamwork were primarily developed through participation in rehearsals, performances, collaborative artistic projects and practice-based learning activities. These competencies were described as being acquired through direct experience, engagement with authentic professional situations, and continuous interaction with peers and academic staff. Participants emphasized that the practical and collaborative nature of an arts education creates particularly favorable conditions for their development.

Academic staff confirmed this interpretation, noting that many socio-emotional competencies are difficult to separate from the artistic process itself. From their per-



spective, artistic practice naturally fosters collaboration, critical reflection, self-awareness and interpersonal sensitivity. At the same time, participants acknowledged that these skills are often developed without clearly articulated learning objectives or systematic procedures for monitoring and assessing their development.

This situation presents both advantages and limitations. On the one hand, the experiential character of an arts education facilitates the authentic internalization of socio-emotional competencies and their integration into professional practice. In this respect, implicit learning may promote deeper, contextually grounded didactic processes. On the other hand, the absence of an explicit educational approach contributes to uneven patterns of competency development, making learning outcomes more dependent on students' individual experiences. This interpretation is further supported by the differentiated distribution of the competencies examined in the study. Whereas adaptability, creativity, and critical thinking were perceived as being highly developed, resilience and leadership received considerably lower ratings. These findings suggest that competencies naturally embedded within artistic practice tend to develop more effectively, whereas those requiring specific learning contexts or deliberate pedagogical interventions receive comparatively less educational support.

From the perspective of the existing literature, this finding is particularly significant because it highlights a discrepancy between the widely recognized importance of socio-emotional competencies and the limited degree to which their development has been formally embedded within higher education curricula. Although participants consistently regarded these competencies as essential for professional integration and long-term success in the arts, they continue to occupy a peripheral position in relation to traditional curricular objectives.

Consequently, one of the principal contributions of the present study lies in demonstrating the need to move from a predominantly implicit model of socio-emotional competency development towards an approach that combines *experiential learning* with *explicit educational interventions*. Such a transition would not require a fundamental transformation of the distinctive character of arts education in general. Rather, it would involve the systematic integration of clearly defined learning objectives, structured educational activities, and reflective learning processes designed to support the conscious and deliberate development of socio-emotional competencies. The findings therefore suggest that one of the major challenges facing contemporary higher arts education is not the development of socio-emotional skillsets per se, but the transformation of what is currently a predominantly implicit learning process into one that is more visible, coherent, and intentionally aligned with the demands of the contemporary labor market and the long-term professional development of graduates.

4.5. Socio-Emotional Competencies and Employability

The integrated analysis of the quantitative and qualitative findings reveals a strong relationship between the socio-emotional competency profile identified in this study and the competencies required for employability within the arts and cultural sectors. The



findings indicate that many of the competencies students perceive as being developed throughout their university education correspond closely to those regarded by professionals as essential for entering, sustaining and progressing within the labor market.

Both the semi-structured interviews with representatives of the professional arts sector and the focus-group discussions consistently highlighted that professional success in the arts depends, to a considerable extent, on competencies such as adaptability, communication, collaboration, creativity and the ability to manage interpersonal relationships effectively. Participants emphasized that the contemporary arts sector is characterized by high levels of occupational mobility, project-based employment, interdisciplinary collaboration, and continually evolving professional contexts. Under these conditions, socio-emotional competencies constitute essential professional resources that complement graduates' discipline-specific artistic expertise.

The questionnaire findings further demonstrate that these are precisely the skills occupying the highest positions within students' perceived competency profiles. Adaptability and flexibility, critical thinking, creativity, and communication all received high ratings. An important implication is that the programmers examined in this study contribute not only to the development of discipline-specific artistic competencies but also to the cultivation of *transferable competencies* that are fundamental to graduate employability.

A particularly significant finding is that participants in the semi-structured interviews associated employability not merely with obtaining employment, but also with graduates' capacity to build and manage flexible career trajectories. Within the arts sector, where careers are frequently non-linear and largely dependent on project-based employment, employability was perceived as a combination of professional expertise, adaptability, and the ability to recognize and capitalize on emerging opportunities. This perspective is consistent with contemporary conceptualizations of employability, which move beyond the traditional emphasis on immediate labor market entry and instead highlight the importance of developing transferable competencies that support long-term career sustainability.

At the same time, the study identifies discrepancies between the competencies regarded as essential for labor market success and students' perceptions of the extent to which these competencies are developed through higher education. In particular, *resilience, stress management, leadership and initiative* were consistently identified by participants as critical for professional success, yet they received considerably lower ratings than other socio-emotional competencies.

This finding is especially significant in the context of artistic professions, where uncertainty, competition, and the need for self-directed career management constitute structural characteristics of the professional environment. Several participants emphasized that graduates must be prepared not only for artistic practice itself but also for managing the challenges associated with career transitions, professional relationships, and the development of their own artistic projects.



Collectively, the evidence suggests that the competency profile identified in this study provides a solid foundation for graduate employability while simultaneously revealing areas that require further development. Whereas adaptability, creativity and collaboration emerge as clear strengths of higher arts education, resilience, leadership and initiative appear to represent competencies that remain comparatively underdeveloped. In line with this interpretation, the findings point to the value of adopting a more explicit educational approach to competencies related to career self-management, coping with professional uncertainty, and the development of professional autonomy.

Taken together, the findings confirm that employability in the arts cannot be reduced to the acquisition of technical or artistic expertise alone. Rather, it depends upon the development of a comprehensive set of socio-emotional competencies that enable graduates to adapt to change, collaborate effectively, manage professional relationships, and build sustainable career paths. In this respect, the socio-emotional competencies identified in the present study may be understood as fundamental determinants of graduate employability and long-term professional development.

4.6. Summary of Findings

The analysis of socio-emotional competencies reveals a competency profile characterized by high levels of perceived development in *adaptability, critical thinking, creativity, and communication*. These competencies appear to be closely associated with the distinctive characteristics of higher arts education and with the collaborative nature of artistic learning. The analysis therefore indicates that the university environment makes a substantial contribution to the development of competencies that are essential for active participation in professional life by fostering intellectual autonomy, cognitive flexibility, and the capacity to collaborate effectively in complex contexts.

At the same time, the study identifies important differences across the various dimensions of socio-emotional competency development. *Resilience, stress management, leadership, and initiative* received comparatively lower ratings, despite being consistently recognized by both participants and representatives of the professional arts sector as essential for successful professional integration and long-term career development. This discrepancy suggests the existence of a gap between the recognized importance of these competencies and the extent to which higher education currently provides systematic opportunities for their development.

One of the most significant findings of the study concerns the predominantly *implicit* nature of socio-emotional competency development. As stated above, the analysis of the interviews, focus groups and academic discussions indicates that most of these competencies are acquired through educational experiences, artistic projects, and social interactions rather than through curricular activities explicitly designed to develop them. This finding helps explain both the high levels of perceived development observed for competencies that are naturally embedded within artistic practice and the comparatively weaker development of competencies that require more structured pedagogical support.



The comparison of the educational findings with evidence obtained from representatives of the professional arts sector further demonstrates that the competency profile identified in this study corresponds closely to the current demands of the contemporary labor market. Adaptability, creativity, collaboration, and communication were consistently regarded by both students and professionals as essential competencies for employability and for managing career trajectories characterized by flexibility, mobility, and project-based employment. At the same time, the findings highlight the need to strengthen competencies such as resilience, leadership, and the capacity to manage professional uncertainty, which are becoming increasingly important in occupational environments characterized by rapid change and increasingly diverse forms of employment.

Overall, the findings suggest that higher arts education provides a solid foundation for the development of socio-emotional competencies that support graduate employability. At the same time, they highlight the value of adopting a more explicit and systematic approach to the development of these competencies within higher education curricula. Such an approach could contribute not only to reducing differences in competency development among students but also to strengthening graduates' capacity to respond effectively to the challenges of contemporary professional practice.

5. Discussion

5.1. Socio-Emotional Competencies as an Outcome of Arts Education

The findings of the present study confirm that the development of socio-emotional competencies constitutes a fundamental dimension of higher education in the performing arts. At the same time, they demonstrate that *adaptability, critical thinking, and creativity* are the transferable competencies perceived by students as having reached the highest levels of development, while also representing skills that are highly relevant for graduate employability. These findings are consistent with the literature that attributes a significant role to arts education in fostering cognitive flexibility, critical reflection and the capacity to respond effectively to complex and ambiguous situations. Eisner (2002) argues that artistic experience cultivates distinctive forms of thinking characterized by openness to multiple interpretations and the ability to adapt to continuously changing contexts. Similarly, Bamford (2006) and Bennett (2016) highlight the contribution of artistic activities to the development of transversal competencies associated with creativity, collaboration and problem-solving.

The present findings suggest that these distinctive characteristics of an arts education are also reflected in participants' perceptions. The high levels of perceived adaptability and critical thinking indicate that educational experiences within theatre and performing arts programmes contribute to the development of competencies that extend beyond discipline-specific expertise and can be transferred across a wide range of professional contexts. This interpretation is consistent with the OECD framework (2015), which identifies adaptability and reflective thinking among the socio-emotional competencies that exert a significant influence on educational achievement and professional performance.



The findings further confirm that arts education, in general, functions as a particularly valuable environment for the development of interpersonal aptitudes and emotional intelligence. Participation in collaborative activities, collective artistic projects and creative processes fosters the development of empathy, communication skills, and the capacity for effective collaboration – competencies identified by CASEL (2020) as fundamental components of social and emotional learning. Consequently, the findings support the view that arts education promotes a competency profile that is highly conducive to graduate employability. At the same time, they highlight the need for more explicit curricular approaches to the development of competencies such as resilience, leadership, and the capacity to manage challenging professional situations. In broader terms, the study provides an interpretative framework for understanding the relationship between educational processes and the development of transversal competencies that are increasingly valued in the contemporary labor market.

5.2. Socio-Emotional Competencies and Graduate Employability

The findings of the present study support the view that *employability cannot be reduced to the possession of technical or discipline-specific competencies alone*. Consistent with the *USEM model* proposed by Knight and Yorke (2004), the competency profile identified in this study highlights the importance of adaptability, critical reflection, collaboration, and personal efficacy for successful professional integration. Likewise, the findings are aligned with contemporary conceptualizations of employability advanced by Tomlinson (2017; Jackson & Tomlinson, 2022) and Fleuren (2024), which emphasize individuals' capacity to construct and sustain flexible career trajectories within labor markets characterized by mobility and continuous change. This understanding is particularly relevant to artistic careers, where professional trajectories are frequently non-linear, project-based, and highly dependent upon graduates' interdisciplinary adaptability.

Consequently, the findings suggest that the development of socio-emotional competencies should be regarded not merely as a complementary objective of higher education, but as a fundamental component of preparation for the labor market. Adaptability, creativity, communication and collaboration constitute essential resources for graduate employability, while strengthening resilience, leadership, and the capacity to manage professional uncertainty emerges as a prerequisite for sustaining long-term careers in the art sector. These findings support the argument that higher education pertaining to the various art fields can make a substantial contribution to graduate employability. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that the relationship between employability and socio-emotional competencies is *structural rather than incidental*, reflecting the intrinsic demands of contemporary artistic careers more than temporary job market conditions.

5.3. The Limitations of the Implicit Development of Socio-Emotional Competencies

One of the most significant conclusions of the study concerns the predominantly *implicit* character of socio-emotional competency development. Although participants generally perceived these competencies as being well developed, the qualitative



findings indicate that their development is only rarely supported through explicit curricular objectives or systematic assessment mechanisms.

This observation can be interpreted in light of the literature on *experiential learning* and the development of transversal competencies in higher education. Numerous studies have shown that universities often foster the development of socio-emotional competencies indirectly through institutional culture, extracurricular activities and collaborative learning experiences. However, more recent research suggests that *explicit educational approaches* to competency development lead to more consistent learning outcomes and reduce variations in competency acquisition among students.

In this regard, the findings point to a tension between the widely recognized importance of socio-emotional competencies and the relatively limited degree to which their development has been formally embedded within higher education curricula. This discrepancy may help explain the differences observed across the competency profile identified in the present study, particularly the comparatively lower levels of perceived development in *resilience* and *leadership*.

5.4. Resilience and Leadership: Competencies Requiring Further Development

One finding that deserves particular attention concerns the comparatively lower levels of perceived development in *resilience* and *leadership* relative to the other socio-emotional competencies examined in this study. This observation is especially significant because the literature on employability and career development consistently identifies these competencies as essential for professional success in contexts characterized by uncertainty or complexity.

These findings may be interpreted in light of the distinctive characteristics of higher education in the arts sector. Whereas adaptability and creativity are naturally fostered through artistic practice, the development of resilience and leadership requires educational environments that explicitly encourage responsibility, project coordination, decision-making, and the management of professional challenges. In the absence of such structured learning opportunities, the development of these competencies remains largely dependent on students' individual experiences.

This interpretation is consistent with the observations of Bennett (2016) and Bridgstock (2009), who argue that graduates entering the creative industries frequently encounter difficulties in managing the transition to professional practice and in assuming responsibility for their own career development. Against this background, the findings suggest that strengthening resilience and leadership should become one of the principal priorities for the further development of higher education programmers within the arts sector.

6. Implications for Arts Education

6.1. Curricular Implications

The findings of the present study highlight the need for a more *explicit curricular approach* to the development of socio-emotional competencies within higher education



programmers in theatre and the performing arts. Although the analysis revealed high levels of perceived development in competencies such as adaptability, creativity, and critical thinking, the processes through which these competencies are acquired remain predominantly implicit and highly dependent on students' individual proclivities.

Within this context, one of the principal implications of the study is the need to integrate socio-emotional competencies more systematically into educational objectives and artistic training practices. This recommendation is supported by recent research on curricular interventions designed to foster transversal competencies, which demonstrates that soft skills such as communication, collaboration, problem-solving or leadership are developed more effectively when they are intentionally embedded within the curriculum rather than left to informal learning alone (Orih et al., 2024).

Such an approach does not necessarily require the introduction of separate courses devoted exclusively to socio-emotional competencies. More so, it involves making effective use of the educational potential already inherent in existing artistic learning activities by incorporating explicit learning objectives related to collaboration, leadership, stress management, critical reflection and personal development.

Similarly, the review conducted by Mann et al. (2024) demonstrates that graduate employability is associated not only with discipline-specific learning but also with curricular, co-curricular, extracurricular, and work-integrated learning experiences. Adopting this perspective would enable competencies that are currently developed primarily through informal learning processes to be supported through more coherent, systematic and predictable educational experiences.

In particular, the findings point to the need to strengthen competencies such as *resilience, leadership and initiative*, which were perceived as being less developed than other socio-emotional competencies. Integrating learning activities centred on project leadership, responsibility-taking, and structured reflection on professional experiences could contribute to the development of these competencies while also reducing disparities among students in their competency development.

In this sense, socio-emotional competencies should not be regarded as complementary outcomes of higher arts education but as *fundamental components of artistic and professional formation*, essential for preparing graduates to navigate the complexity of contemporary professional practice.

6.2. Implications for the Organization of Work-Integrated Learning Experiences

The findings highlight the central role of *work-integrated learning experiences* in developing skills that are essential for graduate employability. Both the quantitative and qualitative evidence indicates that internships constitute one of the principal contexts in which students engage with the realities of professional practice and apply the knowledge and competencies acquired through their university education.

The findings further suggest that the educational impact of internships is strongly influenced by the quality of the learning experience, the level of engagement of workplace



mentors, and the degree of responsibility entrusted to students. Consequently, one important direction for future development involves strengthening the educational value of work-integrated learning by broadening opportunities for active participation, increasing students' autonomy, and expanding partnerships with cultural and artistic organizations.

Moreover, internships and other forms of work-integrated learning provide particularly valuable opportunities for developing competencies that appear to be less systematically fostered within academic programmers, including leadership, stress management and decision-making in complex professional situations.

6.3. Implications for the Relationship Between Higher Education and the Labor Market

The findings confirm the need to strengthen the relationship between higher education and the professional arts sector. Participants in both the semi-structured interviews and the focus groups emphasized the importance of achieving closer alignment between the competencies developed within university programmers and those required in contemporary professional practice.

Accordingly, establishing permanent mechanisms for dialogue between universities and representatives of the cultural and creative sectors could facilitate the continuous adaptation of educational provision while enabling the identification of emerging competency needs. Furthermore, involving professionals from the arts sector in teaching, mentoring, curriculum development, and assessment activities would enhance the transfer of professional knowledge and practical experience, thereby contributing to students' professional development.

The findings also suggest that preparation for careers in the arts sector requires considerably more than the acquisition of discipline-specific expertise. It equally involves developing the capacity to adapt to change, manage professional uncertainty, and exercise increasing autonomy in planning and shaping one's own career.

6.4. Implications for Sustainable Employability

One of the principal contributions of the present study lies in demonstrating the close relationship between socio-emotional competencies and *sustainable employability*. In a contemporary context, characterized by rapidly fluctuating job markets and increasingly diverse forms of employment, professional success can no longer be assessed solely in terms of immediate labor market entry.

The findings indicate that *adaptability, creativity, communication, collaboration, and critical reflection* constitute essential resources for building flexible and sustainable career trajectories. At the same time, the comparatively lower levels of perceived development in *resilience* and *leadership* highlight the need for educational interventions specifically designed to strengthen graduates' capacity to cope with professional challenges and to exercise initiative throughout their careers.

Viewed in this light, the concept of *sustainable employability* provides a valuable framework for reinterpreting the role of higher arts education. University education



should not focus exclusively on preparing graduates for their first job. Rather, it should aim to develop the competencies that enable graduates to navigate professional transitions successfully, adapt to changing occupational contexts, and respond effectively to the challenges associated with long-term careers in the arts sector.

Ultimately, these findings suggest that fostering sustainable employability requires a holistic educational approach that integrates artistic expertise with the systematic development of socio-emotional competencies. Such an approach would better prepare graduates not only to enter the labor market but also to sustain meaningful, resilient and adaptable professional careers throughout their working lives.

7. Conclusions

The present study examined how students enrolled in *theatre and performing arts programmers* perceive the development of socio-emotional competencies throughout their university education and the relevance of these competencies for professional integration and long-term career development. Starting from the premise that contemporary employability extends beyond the acquisition of technical expertise and requires the development of complex personal and interpersonal resources, the study investigated the profile of socio-emotional competencies, the factors influencing their development, and their relationship with the demands of the contemporary labor market.

The findings reveal a competency profile characterized by high levels of perceived development in *adaptability, critical thinking, creativity, communication and collaboration*. These competencies appear to be closely associated with the distinctive characteristics of arts education, which encourages experimentation, critical reflection, teamwork, and the ability to navigate complex and uncertain situations. The analysis suggests that a higher education within any given artistic field makes a substantial contribution to the development of transferable competencies that support graduates' active participation in professional and social life.

At the same time, the study identifies important differences across the various dimensions of socio-emotional competency development. As stated above, *resilience, stress management, leadership, and initiative* received comparatively lower ratings, despite being recognized by both students and representatives of the professional arts sector as essential for success in artistic careers. These findings point to opportunities for further curricular development aimed at strengthening these skillsets.

One of the central conclusions of the study concerns the predominantly *implicit* nature of socio-emotional competency development. The findings indicate that most of these competencies are acquired through participation in artistic activities, collaborative projects, and work-integrated learning experiences rather than through explicitly defined educational objectives. Although this form of experiential learning generates important educational benefits, it may also lead to uneven patterns of competency development and significant differences among students.



The study further confirms the relevance of socio-emotional competencies for graduate employability and supports theoretical perspectives that conceptualize professional success as the result of the interaction between discipline-specific expertise and transferable competencies. Within artistic professions, characterized by occupational mobility, flexibility, and diverse career trajectories, adaptability, communication, collaboration, creativity, and the capacity to manage interpersonal relationships emerge as essential resources for developing sustainable careers.

From an applied perspective, the findings support the need to strengthen the socio-emotional dimension of higher arts education by integrating more explicit educational objectives and learning activities aimed at developing resilience, leadership, initiative, and the capacity to manage professional uncertainty. The study also highlights the importance of maintaining and expanding partnerships between universities and the professional arts sector in order to enhance the educational value of work-integrated learning experiences and to ensure the continuous adaptation of educational provision to the evolving demands of the labor market.

Overall, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between arts education, socio-emotional competencies, and graduate employability. It provides empirical evidence supporting an educational approach that values not only discipline-specific artistic training but also the systematic development of the personal and interpersonal resources required to build sustainable careers within an increasingly dynamic and uncertain professional environment.

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