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**Extracurricular Work Experiences and Soft Skills
Development among Pre-Service Teachers**

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Abstract

Purpose: This study explores the influence of extracurricular work experiences on the development of soft skills among pre-service teachers. Soft skills such as social competences, communication, flexibility, efficacy beliefs, and lifelong learning are crucial for addressing complex classroom challenges and supporting professional growth, yet whether work experiences may help foster them remains underexplored.

Design/methodology/approach: A quantitative cross-sectional design was employed with 709 pre-service teachers enrolled in two bachelor’s programmes in educational sciences. Data was gathered through an online questionnaire at the start of the 2024–2025 academic year.

Findings: Results indicate that extracurricular work experiences positively impact social competencies and communication skills, but show no significant effect on efficacy beliefs or flexibility. Interestingly, pre-service teachers with work experience reported lower lifelong learning skills.

Originality: This study contributes to the limited research on how extracurricular work shapes soft skill acquisition in teacher education. By identifying both benefits and drawbacks of such experiences, it highlights the need for teacher education programmes to more intentionally integrate work experiences into their curricula. As teaching grows more complex, linking experiential learning programmes with pedagogical goals is key to fostering the well-rounded development of future educators.

Keywords - Pre-service teachers, Soft skills, Extracurricular work experience, Social competences, Communication, Efficacy beliefs, Lifelong learning, Flexibility, Teacher education

1. Introduction

Soft skills are increasingly recognised as essential for addressing global challenges such as digital transformation, social inequalities, climate change, and artificial intelligence (OECD, 2019). Their importance is particularly evident in teaching, where pre-service teachers are expected to develop skills that support effective learning, classroom management, lesson planning, and overall teaching success (Macqual *et al.*, 2023; Yurt, 2023). Experiential learning opportunities, especially work experiences, have been associated with the development of communication, career awareness, and self-efficacy (Bennett *et al.*, 2023).

In contrast, many students engage in extracurricular work experiences, defined as paid employment undertaken alongside their studies but not formally integrated into the curriculum (Brosnan *et al.*, 2024). Such work experiences may provide opportunities for responsibility,

interaction, and exposure to real-world (Clark *et al.*, 2015). Research also indicates that extracurricular work experiences provide pre-service teachers with opportunities to develop soft skills while simultaneously contributing to their preparation for future roles as classroom teachers (Wylie and Cummins, 2013). However, they may also introduce competing pressures, such as time constraints and fatigue, which can negatively affect learning engagement (Brecht *et al.*, 2018; Wylie and Cummins, 2013).

Despite growing interest, research examining the relationship between extracurricular work experiences and soft skills development remains limited (Jackson and Rowe, 2023). Existing research has focused primarily on programmes such as Work-Based Learning, Work-Integrated Learning and Dual Higher Education (hereafter, curriculum-based work experiences), which are typically structured, supervised, and aligned with learning outcomes (Aziz, 2025; Jackson, 2013; Urkia-Basterra *et al.*, 2025). Comparatively, employment undertaken alongside studies but outside the curriculum has received less attention. Furthermore, soft skills are often examined as a single aggregated construct, with limited attention to how specific skills may develop in distinct ways. As a result, it remains unclear whether extracurricular work experiences support or hinder the development of specific soft skills among pre-service teachers. Addressing this gap requires moving beyond aggregated approaches and examining soft skills as multidimensional constructs shaped by different learning mechanisms.

In the teaching profession, educators are expected to develop and demonstrate a wide range of skills to foster effective learning. Teachers' cognitive abilities, personal characteristics and contextual environmental factors significantly shape teaching practice and impact student learning outcomes (Hakkinen *et al.*, 2020). Understanding the relationship between soft skill development and extracurricular work experiences is essential for teacher education programmes, as many pre-service teachers engage in employment during their studies, yet these experiences are rarely considered within programme design. Drawing on experiential learning perspectives, this study assumes that soft skill development emerges through engagement with authentic situations, interpersonal interaction, and the interpretation of experience (Kolb, 1984). However, because extracurricular work experiences differ in the opportunities they provide for reflection, feedback, and guided learning, their developmental effects may vary across soft skills.

Therefore, this study examines the influence of extracurricular work experiences on pre-service teachers' soft skills. Specifically, it investigates whether pre-service teachers with work experience report higher levels of social competence, communication, efficacy beliefs, flexibility, and lifelong learning, and whether this relationship varies across years of study.

2. Theoretical framework

While traditional employability research has focused primarily on these technical skills, recent studies have highlighted the increasing importance of non-technical skills (Zegwaard and Rowe, 2019). The definition of these competences remains contested, with terms such as soft skills, generic skills, and transversal competences often used interchangeably (Cinque, 2016; Marin-Zapata *et al.*, 2022). Several frameworks have attempted to define these skills. For instance, the OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030 project defines soft skills as "the ability and capacity

to carry out processes and to be able to use one’s knowledge in a responsible way to achieve a goal” (OECD, 2019, p. 86).

Based on Robles’ (2012) view of soft skills as a mix of interpersonal and professional attributes, and drawing on the OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030 framework, this study focuses on the meta-cognitive, social, and emotional skills of the framework (OECD, 2019). Specifically, on key soft skills such as social competence, communication, adaptability, self-efficacy, and lifelong learning.

2.1. Soft skills and work experience

Soft skill development is vital in higher education, as skills like teamwork and communication reflect the higher-order thinking abilities expected of graduates (Clarke, 2017). Research highlights the possible advantages of balancing work and study, particularly for career understanding, social skills, and the enhancement of professional skills (Brosnan *et al.*, 2024; Clark *et al.*, 2015). Some of these work experiences are integrated into student curricula through curriculum-based work experience programmes (Ferns *et al.*, 2024; Lester and Costley, 2010; Pogatsnik, 2018). Nevertheless, other students also opt for extracurricular work experiences, that is, work experiences not embedded in the curriculum (Brosnan *et al.*, 2024).

Curriculum-based and extracurricular work experiences have been associated with a range of educational and professional benefits. In fact, curriculum-based work experiences have been found to be beneficial for the development of soft skills (Bennett *et al.*, 2023; Jackson, 2013; Jackson and Bridgstock, 2021; Urkia-Basterra *et al.*, 2025). Nevertheless, research on extracurricular work experiences has primarily focused on academic grades, while their impact on skill acquisition applicable in the classroom remains limited (Wylie and Cummins, 2013).

Pedagogical models grounded in experiential learning have gained renewed attention within higher education, with Kolb's cycle (Kolb and Kolb, 2018) increasingly adopted in universities to facilitate student-centred learning and soft skills development, particularly through WIL programmes (Curto-Reverte *et al.*, 2025). Nevertheless, from an experiential learning perspective (Kolb, 1984), different soft skills may rely on distinct learning mechanisms. Interaction-based skills, such as communication, may develop through participation in workplace activities, whereas efficacy beliefs, flexibility, and lifelong learning may require reflection, feedback, and guidance. As these conditions are not systematically present in extracurricular work contexts, development may vary across skills.

2.2. Soft skills in teacher education

In the case of pre-service teachers, a broad and flexible skill set is needed (Wylie and Cummins, 2013). As classrooms grow more complex, today's teachers must continually adapt their instruction, collaborate with diverse professionals, and develop a broader, more flexible skill set than in previous decades (European Commission, 2013). When pre-service teachers struggle to form professional relationships or adapt their teaching strategies, such difficulties may be interpreted as indicators of limited suitability for the profession (Lindqvist *et al.*, 2023). Evidence from other academic fields suggests that extracurricular work experiences enhance students' confidence in making career decisions, strengthen the link between academic studies and future

employment, and foster greater self-efficacy in career-related beliefs (Brosnan *et al.*, 2024). Other findings also indicate that pre-entry work experiences contribute to the development of communication skills and promote more informed career exploration and understanding (Bennett *et al.*, 2023).

High-level communication skills are fundamental for fostering understanding within society (Creo *et al.*, 2020) and function as a foundational element for workplace team efficacy and interpersonal collaboration (Marlow *et al.*, 2018). In this regard, some research mentions that communication skills seem to be developed through work experiences (Bennett *et al.*, 2023). A study on the impact of student part-time employment on skill acquisition relevant to the classroom has found that interaction and communication with a variety of people in extracurricular work experiences contribute to the development of teaching competencies, particularly social and communication skills (Wylie and Cummins, 2013). Moreover, in their research, Wylie and Cummins (2013) found that pre-service teachers believe their work experiences help them acquire skills, attitudes and values relevant to their role as classroom teachers.

Flexibility is crucial for managing constantly changing work settings and unpredictable future circumstances (Jackson *et al.*, 2019). Pre-service teachers should be able to demonstrate flexibility to interpret classroom dynamics accurately, adapt plans spontaneously, and differentiate instruction in real-time to meet diverse student needs (Lindqvist *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, flexibility is also of high importance, specifically for the relationships between teachers and students (Fisher *et al.*, 2016).

Higher levels of lifelong learning among students are also associated with better adaptability and effectiveness in professional environments (Drewery *et al.*, 2017). Pre-service teachers need to embrace lifelong learning to keep up with the evolving needs of the contemporary classroom (Wylie and Cummins, 2013). Despite its importance, lifelong learning remains an emerging field of study, underscoring the need for further exploration into how work experiences contribute to its development (Drewery *et al.*, 2020).

Teachers' mindsets, skills, and instructional approaches play a crucial role in driving educational change, and nearly all frameworks that define soft skills emphasise the importance of teachers' professional development for effectively implementing them (Voogt and Roblin, 2012). Teachers' professional knowledge develops over time, with classroom observations positively influencing this growth (Sorge *et al.*, 2019). Similarly, research suggests that the development of professional competencies in pre-service teachers may be influenced by grade level, as advanced teaching skills often require concepts and skills acquired in later grades (Yurt, 2023). However, to our knowledge, whether the mentioned soft skills are influenced by the year of study has not yet been investigated.

3. The present study

Drawing on experiential learning perspectives, this study examines whether extracurricular work experiences are associated with different patterns of soft skill development among pre-service teachers.

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In this study, we focus on the following soft skills: social competence, communication, efficacy beliefs, flexibility, and lifelong learning. Social competences, also referred to as interpersonal skills, encompass the ability to build and sustain professional relationships, collaborate productively, and contribute to a cooperative team dynamic (Scoupe *et al.*, 2023). Effective communication involves students' comfort in expressing their thoughts and ideas clearly and confidently, both verbally and in writing, to diverse audiences (Scoupe *et al.*, 2023). In terms of career-related competencies, self-efficacy is often highlighted as the belief in one's ability to carry out tasks within a specific professional context (Scoupe *et al.*, 2023). Career attributes also include flexibility, defined as the capacity to respond actively or passively to change (Scoupe *et al.*, 2023; Van Der Heijde and Van Der Heijden, 2006), and lifelong learning, which refers to students' ability to take initiative in their studies and career planning, actively anticipate change, and engage in ongoing lifelong learning activities (Scoupe *et al.*, 2023).

Therefore, this article presents an empirical study on the effects of extracurricular work experiences on soft skills development among pre-service teachers. More specifically, this study aims to examine the potential effects of extracurricular work experiences on the development of five key soft skills: social competences, communication skills, flexibility, efficacy beliefs, and lifelong learning. It also aims to examine how the relationship between extracurricular work experiences and the development of the mentioned soft skills differs across years of study.

The following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Pre-service teachers with extracurricular work experience demonstrate higher levels of certain soft skills.

H2: The relationship between extracurricular work experience and soft skills varies by the year of study.

Through this research, we seek to deepen the understanding of how extracurricular work experiences may contribute to the development of skills increasingly vital in today's complex and diverse educational and professional settings. The findings will help inform higher education practices to better prepare future educators for the challenges of modern classrooms. Despite the increasing emphasis on soft skills, there is limited research on how these experiences affect pre-service teachers' competencies. Examining this relationship is crucial for recognising how experiential learning fosters professional skills. Ultimately, this research can inform more inclusive educational strategies by offering tailored support for working pre-service teachers and valuing informal learning that occurs beyond traditional classroom settings.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research procedure and sample

We examined whether significant differences exist between pre-service teachers with prior work experience and those without across the years of study, using descriptive statistics. We followed by conducting a multivariate analysis of variance and independent analyses of variance for variables that showed significant effects. All variables showed adequate skewness and kurtosis values (skewness: range from -0.35 to -0.08; kurtosis: range from 0.17 to 0.24), which were considered acceptable for normality. All analyses were conducted using JAMOVI version 2.6.26.0.

The data collected were based on self-reported measures. The assessment of soft skills is challenging, as they are context-dependent, multifaceted, and not directly observable (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015). Within Social Cognitive Theory, perceived competence and self-efficacy are central to behaviour and learning (Bandura, 1977). Furthermore, the related Social Cognitive Career Theory emphasises the role of self-beliefs in shaping educational and professional trajectories (Lent et al., 1994; Lent & Brown, 2019).

The study sample consisted of 706 pre-service teachers (see Table I) enrolled in two Bachelor's degree programmes, Early Childhood Education and Primary Education, at a university in the Basque Country (northern Spain). Pre-service teachers were aged from 17 to 46 years, with almost 85% of them between 17 and 22 years old.

Table I. Demographic characteristics of the participants

<i>Master's</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Non-binary</i>	<i>Prefer not to answer</i>
N	447	256	1	2
%	63.3	36.26	0.14	0.28
<i>Age range</i>	<i>17-22</i>	<i>23-30</i>	<i>31-40</i>	<i>40 +</i>
N	600	98	5	3
%	84.99	13.88	0.71	0.43

Source: Author's own work

Convenience sampling was used to recruit pre-service teachers enrolled in two education degree programmes. This approach was appropriate given the study's focus on a defined population of teacher education students. The sample includes students across all years of study, increasing variability and improving representativeness within the institutional context. Participation was open to all enrolled students, ensuring inclusivity.

Data were collected through an online survey distributed during class sessions at the beginning of the academic year. Students were initially informed about the nature of the study, emphasising that their involvement was completely voluntary and confidential. All pre-service teachers signed an electronic informed consent prior to data collection. Approximately 10 minutes were required to complete the survey. The study protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects of the university.

4.2. Instruments

All 5 soft skills, Social competences, Efficacy beliefs, Flexibility, Lifelong learning, and Oral and written communication were measured using the SECQ Questionnaire (Scoupe *et al.*, 2023). All were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale (from 1= "Completely disagree" to 5= "Completely agree").

Table II. Structure of the questionnaire and reliability analysis

<i>Soft skill</i>	<i>Cronbach's α</i>	<i>Item number</i>	<i>Example</i>
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Social competences	0.73	6	I can operate within and contribute to a respectful, supportive, and cooperative group climate.
Efficacy beliefs	0.81	8	I feel confident and ready to start working.
Flexibility	0.80	4	In my field of expertise, I consider myself competent to add value by embracing new ideas and demonstrating creativity in addressing challenges and problems.
Lifelong learning	0.69	4	I am focused on continuously developing myself.
Oral and written communication	0.77	5	I clearly express my thoughts and opinions in writing.

Source: Author's own work

The Lifelong Learning subscale of the SECQ Questionnaire (Scoupe *et al.*, 2023) originally consists of six items. However, reliability analysis indicated a Cronbach's alpha of 0.55, suggesting low internal consistency. To improve reliability, two items, which were reverse items, were removed from the subscale for this study.

As the original SECQ instrument was developed in English, the questionnaire was translated into Basque and Spanish using a back-translation procedure. First, it was translated from English into Basque and Spanish, and then independently back-translated into English by a second translator. The original and back-translated versions were compared to ensure semantic equivalence and conceptual consistency. The translated questionnaire was also reviewed with a small group of students outside the study sample to assess clarity and comprehension. Minor adjustments were made before final administration.

5. Results

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the means and standard deviations of the pre-service teachers with and without work experience across the four years of study (Table III). Overall, pre-service teachers with prior work experience reported higher average scores in social competences. In general, pre-service teachers with work experience in the early years of study also reported higher average scores. An exception was observed in communication skills, where pre-service teachers with prior work experience in Year 1 reported lower scores than those without, although the following years reported higher scores. Differences in efficacy beliefs, flexibility, and lifelong learning are less consistent across years and between groups.

Table III. Descriptives and comparison of pre-service teachers with and without prior work experience and year of study

Variable	Year of study	Work experience	No work experience	N
		M (SD)	M (SD)	

Social competences	Year 1	4.40 (0.395)	4.28 (0.408)	238
	Year 2	4.44 (0.454)	4.27 (0.455)	184
	Year 3	4.25 (0.412)	4.18 (0.424)	123
	Year 4	4.24 (0.382)	4.23 (0.506)	157
Efficacy beliefs	Year 1	4.12 (0.421)	4.10 (0.478)	238
	Year 2	3.96 (0.555)	3.90 (0.451)	182
	Year 3	3.76 (0.600)	3.83 (0.580)	119
	Year 4	3.76 (0.525)	3.69 (0.594)	157
Flexibility	Year 1	3.89 (0.482)	3.83 (0.491)	239
	Year 2	3.91 (0.523)	3.79 (0.504)	181
	Year 3	3.66 (0.518)	3.51 (0.542)	121
	Year 4	3.60 (0.585)	3.65 (0.592)	155
Lifelong learning	Year 1	4.00 (0.507)	4.01 (0.493)	236
	Year 2	4.03 (0.550)	3.86 (0.454)	179
	Year 3	3.76 (0.579)	3.80 (0.504)	121
	Year 4	3.83 (0.588)	3.87 (0.584)	148
Communication	Year 1	3.80 (0.631)	3.87 (0.545)	237
	Year 2	4.01 (0.546)	3.68 (0.619)	181
	Year 3	3.83 (0.574)	3.69 (0.559)	122
	Year 4	3.92 (0.588)	3.82 (0.573)	150

Source: Author's own work

5.1. Analysis of variance

A comparative analysis was conducted to examine the influence of prior work experience and pre-service teachers' year of study on the development of the previously mentioned five soft skills. As shown in Table IV, statistically significant differences were found in social competencies ($F = 7.88$; $p = 0.01$) and communication skills ($F = 6.43$; $p = 0.01$) between pre-service teachers with prior work experience and their year of study.

Individual analysis of variance indicates that previous work significantly influences social competencies (mean diff = 0.09; $p = 0.01$; $d = 0.22$). We also identified significant effects regarding the year of study. Post-hoc tests reveal that pre-service teachers in the third year show higher social competences (mean diff = 0.14; $p = 0.03$; $d = 0.32$) compared to pre-service teachers in the second year. Nevertheless, no significant interaction was found between previous work experience and year of study.

In the case of communication skills (mean diff = 0.13; $p = 0.01$; $d = 0.22$), pre-service teachers with prior work experience also demonstrate significantly higher mean scores. The interaction between the year of study and work experience (see Table IV) also indicates statistical significance. Second-year pre-service teachers with prior work experience exhibit significantly higher communication skills compared to those in the second (mean diff = 0.33; $p = 0.01$; $d = 0.57$) and third years (mean diff = 0.33; $p = 0.023$; $d = 0.57$) without such experience.

Efficacy beliefs were not significantly associated with work experience or its interaction with year of study, although a strong effect of year of study was observed ($F = 19.96$, $p < .001$). A similar pattern emerged for flexibility, with no significant effect of work experience but a significant effect of year of study ($F = 10.87$, $p < .001$). Likewise, lifelong learning was not influenced by work experience, while year of study showed a significant effect ($F = 5.95$, $p < .001$).

Table IV. Effects of work experience and year of study

		<i>F</i>	<i>Mean Square</i>	<i>p</i>
Social competence	Work experience	7.88	1.47	0.01*
	Year of study	2.89	0.539	0.04*
	Work experience * Year of study	0.88	0.16	0.45
Efficacy beliefs	Work experience	0.82	0.22	0.37
	Year of study	19.96	5.44	<.001*
	Work experience * Year of study	0.90	0.25	0.44
Flexibility	Work experience	3.67	1.01	0.06
	Year of study	10.87	2.99	<.001*
	Work experience * Year of study	0.51	0.14	0.68
Lifelong learning	Work experience	0.82	0.23	0.36
	Year of study	5.95	1.63	<.001*
	Work experience * Year of study	1.27	0.35	0.28
Communication	Work experience	6.43	2.13	0.01*
	Year of study	0.44	0.15	0.724
	Work experience * Year of study	3.53	1.17	0.02*

Source: Author's own work

Overall, the findings provide partial support for H1, as extracurricular work experience is associated with higher levels of social competences and communication, but not with other soft skills. H2 is also partially supported, as the relationship between work experience and communication varies across years of study.

6. Discussion

This study examined the influence of extracurricular work experiences on pre-service teachers' soft skills and found differentiated effects across competences. Interpreting these findings through experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), participation in work experiences alone does not necessarily lead to competence development. Instead, learning depends on whether experiences are accompanied by reflection and connected to conceptual knowledge. The differentiated results observed in this study suggest that extracurricular work experiences may provide opportunities for practice, but without structured reflection or integration with academic learning, they may only support the development of certain skills.

The finding that pre-service teachers with extracurricular work experiences seem to have significantly higher social competences and communication skills is in line with Wylie and Cummins (2013). These authors also emphasise the social nature of the workplace, which requires interaction with diverse individuals and the ability to navigate complex interpersonal dynamics. Managing these social dynamics effectively requires strong communication skills, which can, in turn, reinforce and further develop both skills (Wylie and Cummins, 2013). These skills are particularly important for pre-service teachers, and their early development, even outside of formal education, may enhance classroom management, teacher-student relationships, and professional readiness.

Nevertheless, although the differences were statistically significant, both social competences and communication skills exhibited only a small effect size. This indicates that, despite the association between work experience and higher scores, the practical impact of this experience is limited. In this context, Clark et al. (2015) found that first work experiences, together with other extracurricular activities, helped students develop mainly interpersonal and communication skills. Despite that, they also found that paid work experience did not outperform other extracurricular activities, meaning that other factors can also influence the positive influence we discovered.

We found that extracurricular work experience enhances students' social competencies regardless of their year of study, a notable result given prior evidence that year of study significantly influences networking skills (Wylie and Cummins, 2013). In contrast, a significant interaction was found between the two regarding communication skills, suggesting that extracurricular work experience enhances communication skills, although this effect is more pronounced in the second and third years of university experience. First-year pre-service teachers may struggle to translate work experiences into improved communication skills as effectively as their more experienced peers. This aligns with Yurt's (2023) finding that the development of professional skills in teacher candidates differs based on their academic year, as specific skills are developed from concepts and skills gained in higher grades.

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The lack of significance of efficacy beliefs, flexibility and lifelong learning indicates that the developmental value of work experience is not uniform across skills. Some appear to benefit from participation and interaction, whereas others may depend on additional conditions, such as reflective engagement and guided support. This suggests that experiential learning operates through multiple pathways rather than a single, consistent process. Specifically, the lack of significance of efficacy beliefs is in line with previous research, which mentions no impact of part-time work on overall self-efficacy (Griffiths *et al.*, 2021). While the authors found that students involved in more extracurricular activities had higher levels of self-efficacy, it was unclear whether this self-efficacy led to participation in extracurricular activities or if participation boosted self-efficacy.

The lack of a significant relationship between extracurricular work experience and perceived flexibility could be attributable to the structured nature of many student work environments, which may constrain opportunities for developing adaptive or flexible behaviours. Nonetheless, previous research has identified a positive association between work experience and career adaptability (Monteiro and Almeida, 2015). Collaboration among individuals from diverse nationalities (Creo *et al.*, 2020) and participation in international curriculum-based work experiences (Jackson and Dean, 2023) appear to influence the development of flexibility. These findings suggest that not all work experiences contribute equally to the development of flexibility. Structured or routine jobs can offer limited opportunities for adaptive growth, whereas more complex, intercultural, or curriculum-integrated experiences may play a more significant role.

Interestingly, lifelong learning scores were slightly lower among pre-service teachers with extracurricular work experience, although differences were not statistically significant. One explanation is that employment could prioritise immediate task completion over longer-term learning goals. Many student jobs may involve routine tasks, which may limit opportunities for autonomous learning and reduce time for self-directed development. Previous research suggests that lifelong learning dispositions are more likely to develop when workplace experiences are intentionally structured and connected to learning goals (Billett and Choy, 2011). Curriculum-based work experiences, which integrate mentoring, feedback, and guided reflection, may therefore better support awareness of learning within professional environments (Ferns *et al.*, 2024).

Taken together, the findings indicate that extracurricular work experiences contribute to soft skill development in a selective rather than uniform manner. While interpersonal skills such as communication and social competences appear to benefit from workplace interaction, other skills show no association. This pattern supports a differentiated view of experiential learning, suggesting that the development of soft skills depends on the alignment between the nature of the experience and the underlying learning mechanisms required for each skill.

6.1. Theoretical implications

This study contributes to the literature on soft skills development by clarifying the role of extracurricular work experiences in teacher education. The findings indicate that extracurricular work experiences do not foster soft skills uniformly; instead, they contribute selectively depending on the nature of the skill. While interpersonal skills such as communication and social competence appear to benefit from workplace interaction, other skills, such as lifelong learning, flexibility, and

efficacy beliefs, do not develop automatically. This suggests that soft skill development through extracurricular work is context-dependent and varies across skills rather than emerging as a generalised outcome.

From an experiential learning perspective, these findings extend Kolb's (1984) framework by highlighting that participation in experience does not guarantee learning across all domains. Experiential learning seems to depend on mediating conditions such as reflection, feedback, guidance, and the extent to which experiences are meaningfully connected to professional learning processes. In this regard, while some skills may develop through repeated participation and interaction, others may require additional conditions.

Third, the study contributes to teacher education research by focusing on pre-service teachers, a population in which the role of extracurricular work experiences has been underexplored. The findings suggest that informal work contexts may complement formal training but do not replace structured pedagogical experiences. This supports theoretical perspectives emphasising that competence development is shaped not only by exposure to practice, but also by the presence of reflective and supportive learning structures that help students interpret and integrate those experiences.

6.2. Practical implications

The findings offer several practical implications for teacher education programmes. The positive association between extracurricular work experience and communication and social competences suggests that work outside the curriculum may contribute to skills relevant for teaching. However, the absence of significant effects for other soft skills indicates that work experience alone may not be sufficient. Curriculum-based work experiences, such as Dual Higher Education or Work-Integrated Learning, may provide a more coherent framework by aligning workplace activities with programme objectives and incorporating mentoring, feedback, and guided reflection.

In addition, institutions could introduce mechanisms that help students make explicit connections between their work experiences and pedagogical learning. Structured reflection tasks, mentoring conversations, or portfolio-based assignments may support students in identifying transferable competences and interpreting workplace experiences in relation to teaching practice. Such strategies may be particularly relevant for skills such as lifelong learning and efficacy beliefs, which appear to require more intentional scaffolding.

Finally, not all work experiences contribute equally to skill development. Programmes may therefore encourage students to engage in work involving interpersonal interaction and responsibility. Expanding structured curriculum-based work pathways may help ensure workplace learning is intentionally designed rather than incidental.

7. Limitations and further research

This study is not without its limitations. First, the nature of pre-service teachers' work experiences was not specified. Information such as the type of employment, the number of hours worked, and whether the work was part-time or full-time was not collected. These factors could

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provide important insights into the level of student involvement in the workplace and its potential impact on skill development.

Second, data on pre-service teachers' motivations for engaging in extracurricular work and their socio-economic status were not collected. These variables may influence how pre-service teachers approach and benefit from work experiences, as students who work out of financial necessity might experience and interpret their work environments differently from those who work for professional development or personal enrichment.

Third, the study relied on self-reported data. While self-perceptions are theoretically meaningful and widely used in soft skill research, they may be subject to response biases such as social desirability or overestimation. Future research should complement self-reports with alternative measures, such as tutor evaluations or performance-based assessments.

Fourth, the study lacked qualitative data, which could have provided a deeper understanding of the contextual and personal factors influencing the development of soft skills through extracurricular work experiences. Incorporating this qualitative data might help clarify the mechanisms behind the observed differences in quantitative results. Future research would also benefit from employing a mixed-methods approach, allowing researchers to identify existing relationships and further understand the processes involved in soft skill development.

The study was conducted within a single faculty and field of study, which limits the generalisability of the findings to other disciplinary or institutional contexts. Differences in programme structure, labour market opportunities, and workplace expectations may influence how extracurricular work experiences relate to soft skill development.

In addition, the cross-sectional design prevents causal interpretation. Although associations were observed between extracurricular work and certain soft skills, it cannot be determined whether work experiences contribute to skill development or whether pre-service teachers with stronger soft skills are more likely to engage in extracurricular work.

Finally, the modification of the lifelong learning subscale may have reduced the conceptual breadth of the construct; therefore, findings related to lifelong learning should be interpreted with caution.

Future research should consider the specific characteristics of pre-service teachers' employment, including the type of job, hours worked, and its relevance to their academic field. Given the exploratory nature of the study, the analysis focuses on identifying group differences across work experience and year of study. More complex analytical approaches, including models that control for additional variables such as socio-economic background, type of employment, or motivation for working, may provide further insight into these relationships and should be considered in future research. Furthermore, longitudinal studies are particularly recommended to track the evolution of soft skills throughout pre-service teachers' academic journeys, allowing for a deeper understanding of how extracurricular work contributes to professional growth over time.

8. Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the complex role of extracurricular work experiences in shaping the soft skills of pre-service teachers. Work experience is associated with higher levels of social competences and communication, although no significant effects were found for the other skills. The relationship between work experience and communication also varies across years of study, while no interaction effects were observed for other skills. These results indicate that extracurricular work does not uniformly enhance soft skills, instead, it contributes selectively depending on the nature of the skill.

Interpreted through an experiential learning perspective (Kolb, 1984), these findings suggest that participation in work experience alone is insufficient to support broad skill development. While skills grounded in interaction, such as communication and social competences, may develop through practice, others appear to require additional conditions, including reflection, feedback, and alignment with professional learning. This reinforces the need to conceptualise experiential learning as a differentiated and context-dependent process, rather than a uniform pathway to skill development.

Given the cross-sectional design and reliance on self-reported measures, these findings should be interpreted as associations within this specific context rather than causal effects. Nevertheless, the results indicate that informal work experiences may complement, but not replace, structured learning opportunities within teacher education programmes. This underscores the importance of considering the integration of work experiences within the academic curriculum. Educational strategies such as curriculum-based work experiences may provide richer developmental opportunities. As teaching practice becomes more complex, aligning experiential learning opportunities with pedagogical goals is essential to effectively support the holistic development of future educators.

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