



GROWTH  **4** **SMEs**

**Questionnaires from Norway, Belgium and Denmark
2021**

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1.0 Introduction

University College Leuven-Limburg in Belgium, University of Oslo in Norway, City of Aarhus, and Aarhus University in Denmark are working together on the project Growth4SMEs (GRaduate Ongoing Workqualification Towards offering Highly qualified skills for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises). The project will among other things create a digital platform that will collect input from SMEs about their skill shortage and subsequently design an education set-up so that graduates/students obtain the sought after skills.

To build up knowledge about these topics, SMEs from Norway, Denmark, and Belgium were asked to fill out a questionnaire about what kind of skills companies in their respective countries need right now. More specific, the companies were asked if they had employed a recent university graduate in the past few years, which skills and competencies they find the most important among their employees, and which competences and skills they expect recent graduates to have as newly appointed (<https://growth4sme.eu/>).

413 SMEs from Norway, Denmark, and Belgium have answered the questionnaires, and the data is collected in the spring and summer 2021. In Denmark, the job centre in Aarhus has send out the questionnaires, and in Norway and Belgium, the universities have send out the questionnaires to firms, they cooperate with. In the following, data from the three countries is presented separately and finally data from the three countries is compiled to show the most requested skills and competences across borders.

2.0 Norway

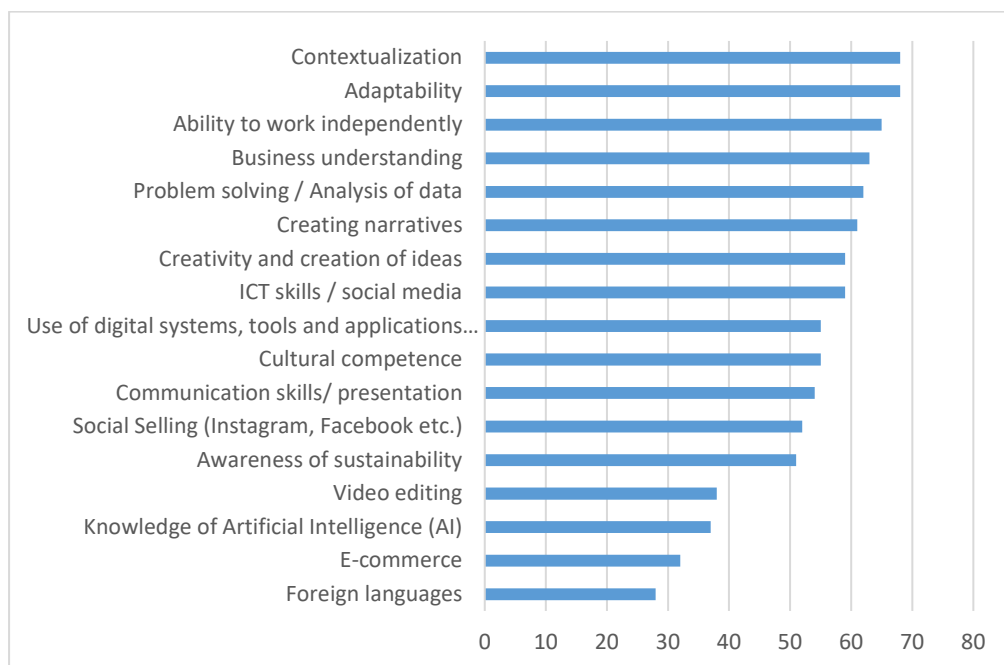
2.1/ Employing recent graduates

Fourteen Norwegian companies answered the questionnaire, and nine of the companies have employed a recent university graduate (both bachelor and master; max 2 years after graduation) in the past five years. Four out of nine companies that have employed a recent graduate in the past five years have experienced a lack of skills among the applicants. Most of the companies answer that the graduates are missing experience, which they find very natural. Furthermore, several companies express that the graduates are missing business understanding.

2.2/ Most important skills among employees

The next part of the questionnaire is about which skills and competences SMEs find the most important among their employees. More specific, the companies were asked the following question: “Which skills and competences do you consider the most important among your employees for conducting your business?”. The companies then had several options – among others contextualization, adaptability, E-commerce and cultural competence. The preferences of the Norwegian companies are shown in figure 1.

As it appears from figure 1 below, the three most important skills according to the Norwegian SMEs are contextualization, adaptability, and ability to work independently. Thus, it is important that the employees can put things into perspective and see correlations (contextualization), are willing to adapt to new requirements and demands at the workplace (adaptability), and are able to work independently.

Figure 1. Most important skills among employees. Norway.

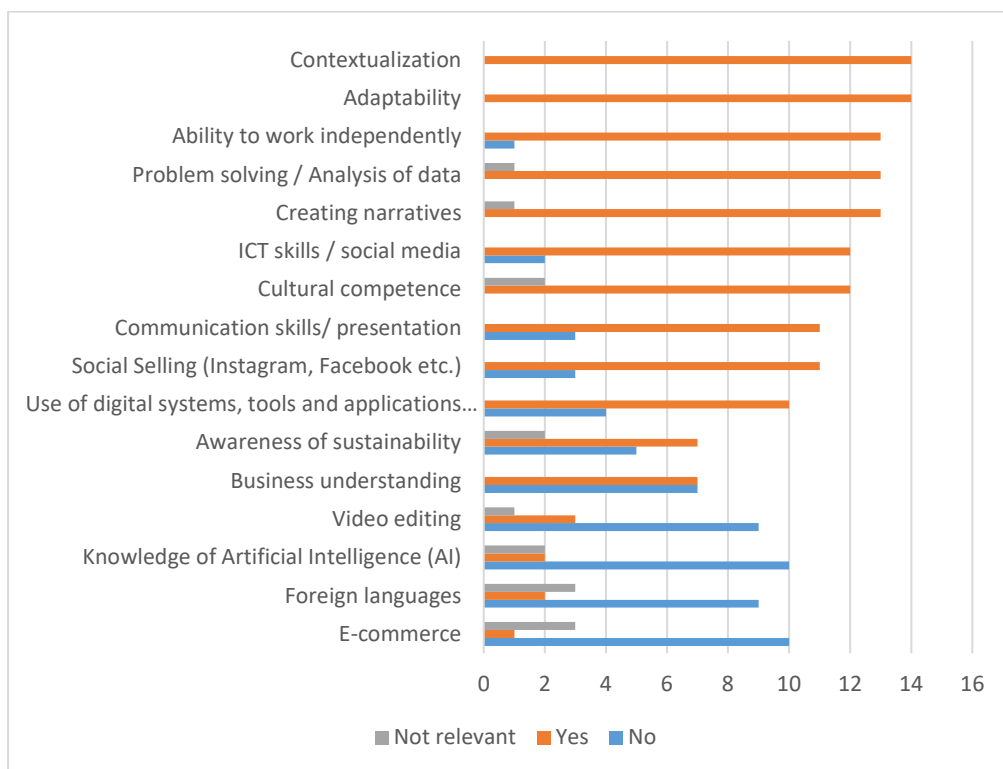
Note: The respondents were asked the question: “Which skills and competences do you consider the most important among your employees for conducting your business?” The companies should then choose the importance of each skill (the possible skills appear from figure 1), and they were able to answer on a scale from 1-5, where 1 denotes “not important”, og 5 denotes “important”. In the figure, the numbers (1-5) are summed up so the skills or competences with the highest values are those that the companies find most important.

Data from Norway, Growth4SMEs, June 2021

Furthermore, the companies find many of the other competences important – business understanding, problem solving, creating narratives, and creativity are also important skills. As it appears from figure 1, many of the skills have high scores when it comes to their importance. However, skills such as video editing, knowledge of Artificial Intelligence (AI), E-commerce, and foreign languages appear to be less important for the SMEs.

2.3/ Future competences and skills

The last part of the questionnaire is about which competences and skills the SMEs expect recent graduates to have when they hire them. Here, the respondents were presented to a lot of different skills, and they could then answer “yes”, “no”, or “not relevant” in regard to whether they find these important or not. Figure 2 looks very similar to figure 1. Again it is contextualization, adaptability, and ability to work independently that the respondents mostly expect the recent graduates to master.

Figure 2. Future competences and skills. Norway.

Note: Number of respondents who have indicated "yes", "no" or "not relevant" to the question: "Which competencies and skills do you expect recent graduates to have when you hire them?". The respondents had different applicable options, which appear from the figure.

Data from Norway, Growth4SMEs, June 2021

In the other end, knowledge of Artificial Intelligence (AI), E-commerce, and foreign language again appear to be the skills, the respondents do not expect recent graduates to have. The most remarkable in this figure in relation to figure 1 is business understanding where 50% of the respondents expect recent graduates to master this skill, while the last 50% do not. In figure 1 business, understanding was the 4th most important skill among the employees. It could seem like Norwegian companies are thinking that business understanding is something employees develop over time in the company, and not necessary something they have to master as newly appointed.

The respondents were also able to mention other competences they would expect recent graduates to have and a few companies suggested for instance fine written ability to communicate.

3.0 Belgium

3.1/ Employing recent graduates

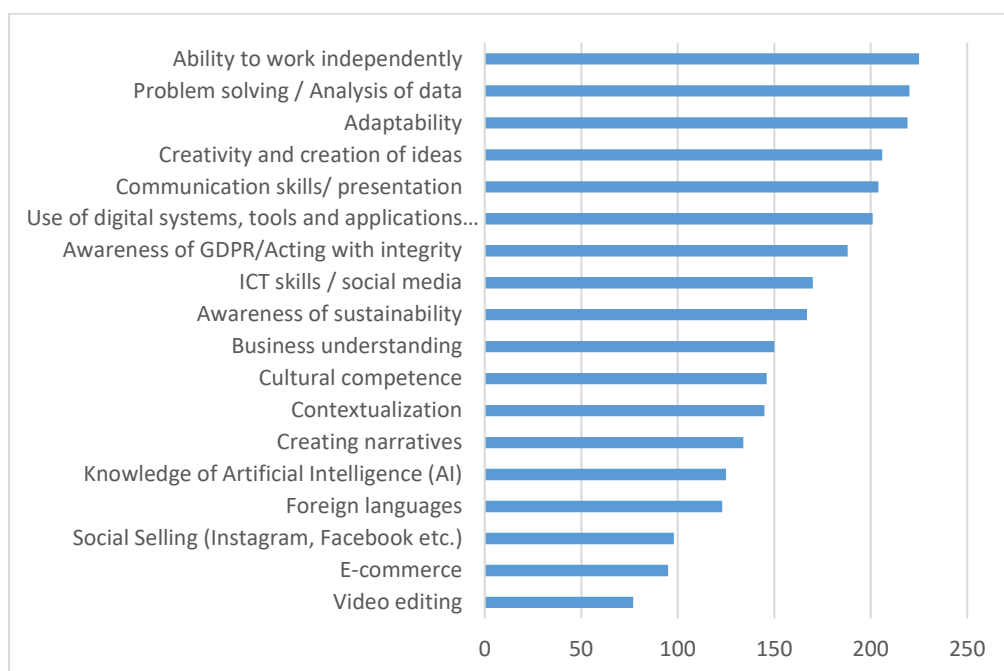
In Belgium 49 companies answered the questionnaire, and among them 44 companies have employed a recent university graduate (both bachelor and master; max 2 years after graduation) in the past five years. Furthermore, 35 of the companies have experienced a lack of skills among the graduates/applicants. In other words, 79.5% of the companies find that the recent graduates lack skills. Several of the respondents reply that the recent graduates among other things are missing technological and communicative skills.

3.2/ Most important skills among employees

The Belgium companies were asked the same questions as the Norwegian companies, and in the following figure it appears, which skills and competences they consider the most important among their employees for conducting their business.

In Belgium, the three most important competences among the employees are ability to work independently, problem solving, and adaptability, cf. figure 3 below. The top three in Belgium is almost equivalent to the top three in Norway, except from contextualisation, which the Norwegian companies find the most important, while contextualization is the 12th most important competence according to the Belgian companies. Furthermore, the Belgian respondents regard creativity, communication skills, and ICT skills as quite important. Conversely, the companies find competences such as social selling, e-commerce, and video editing least important.

The respondents were also able to write down, if there were other skills, they find important in addition to the offered opportunities. Several of the answers emphasise social skills such as empathy, open communication, integrity, teamwork, and involvement.

Figure 3. Most important skills among employees. Belgium.

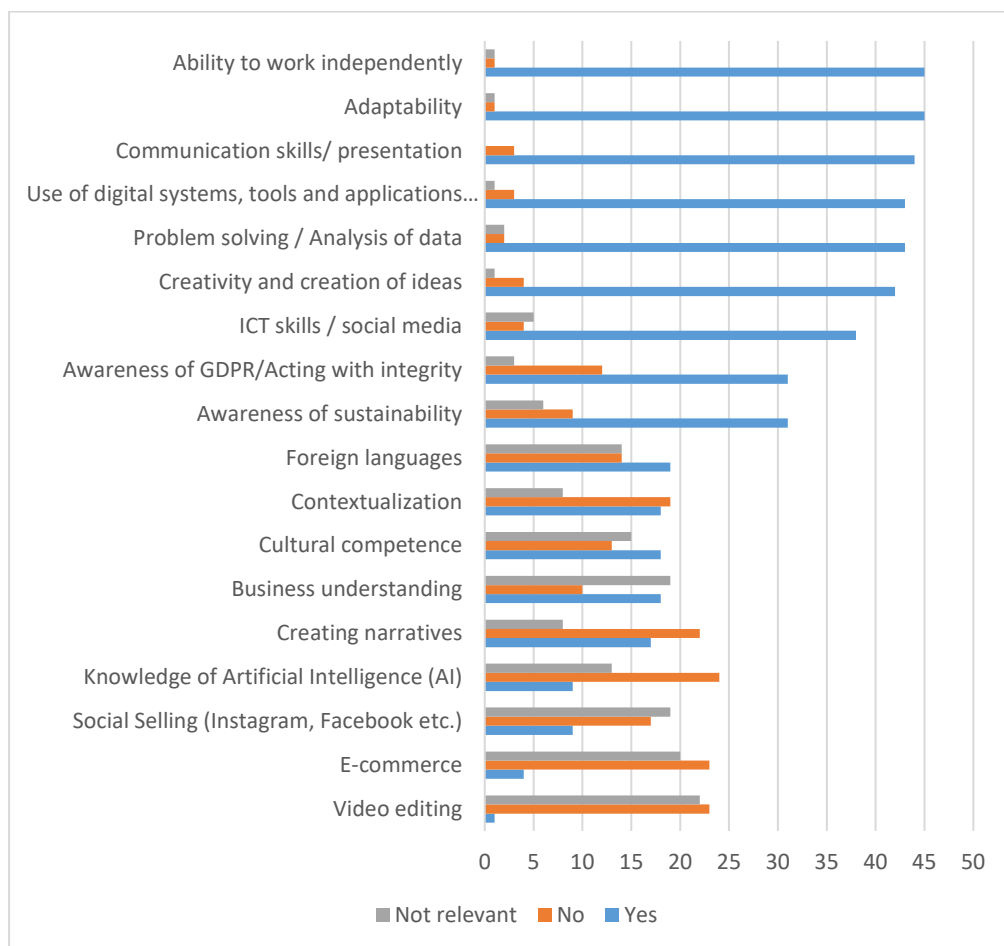
Note: The respondents were asked the question: "Which skills and competences do you consider the most important among your employees for conducting your business?" The companies should then choose the importance of each skill (the possible skills appear from figure 1), and they were able to answer on a scale from 1-5, where 1 denotes "not important", og 5 denotes "important". In the figure, the numbers (1-5) are summed up so the skills or competences with the highest values are those that the companies find most important.

Data from Belgium, Growth4SMEs, June 2021

3.3/ Future competences and skills

In figure 4 it is shown that the Belgian companies expect the recent graduates to have the ability to work independently, to be flexible and adjust to changing factors, and to possess communication skills, cf. figure 4.

Furthermore, the companies find that the most important future competences are almost equally significant: ability to work independently, creativity and creation of ideas scores. Moreover, the competences and skills the companies expect the new graduates to manage are very similar to the competences and skills they find the most important among their employees, cf. figure 3.

Figure 4. Future competences and skills. Belgium.

Note: Number of respondents who have indicated "yes", "no" or "not relevant" to the question: "Which competencies and skills do you expect recent graduates to have when you hire them?". The respondents had different applicable options, which appear from the figure.

Data from Belgium, Growth4SMEs, June 2021

Conversely, the companies do not expect new graduates to have competences such as knowledge of Artificial Intelligence, Social Selling, E-commerce, and video editing. Furthermore, a few respondents empathized the recent graduates willingness to learn and to be team workers.

4.0 Denmark

4.1/ Employing recent graduates

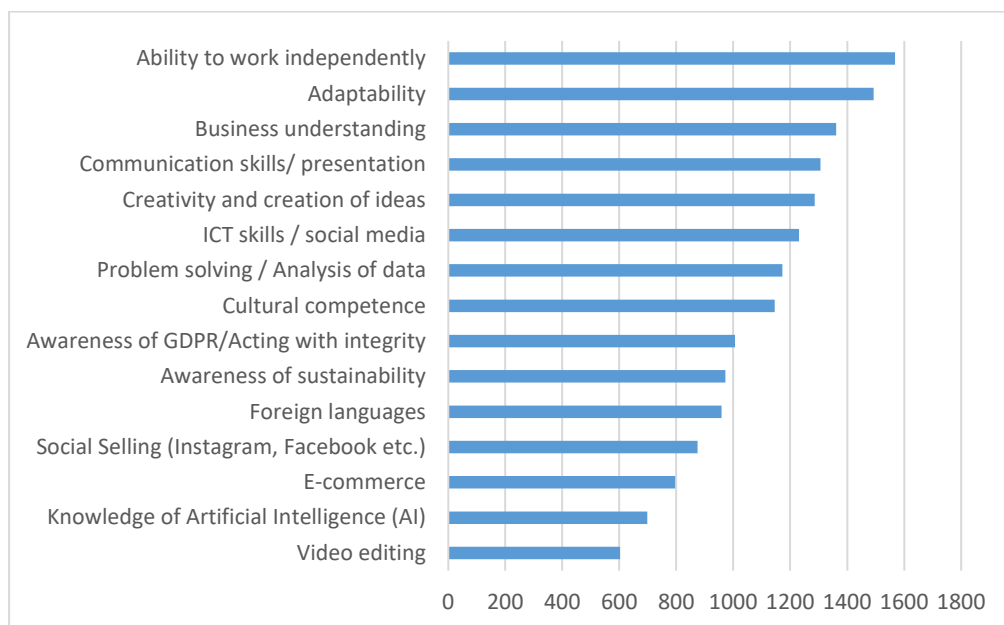
350 Danish SMEs have participated in the questionnaire survey¹, and 166 of the companies have employed a recent university graduate (both bachelor and master; max 2 years after graduation) in the past five years. The companies report that they have had several positive experiences with recent graduates. Several of the companies find that the recent graduates have a high amount of commitment, drive, initiative, motivation, and the newest knowledge within the field.

In Denmark, 91 companies have experienced a lack of skills among the graduates/applicants, which correspond to 54.1%. Most of the Danish companies find that the graduates are missing general experience, but most respondents also find this natural and unavoidable. Furthermore, several companies express that the graduates are missing business understanding, maturity, and general practice.

4.2/ Most important skills among employees

In figure 5 below it appears which skills and competences the Danish companies consider the most important among their employees. In Denmark, the two most important skills are the ability to work independently and adaptability, cf. figure 5. These two skills are clearly the two most important, whereupon business understanding and communication skills/presentation are the third and fourth most important skills to possess as an employee in a Danish SME. Conversely, the companies find competences such as knowledge of e-commerce Artificial Intelligence and video editing least important.

¹ In Denmark, both public and private organizations answered the questionnaire. I have sorted out the public "companies" by looking at whether the company belong under the state/municipality and whether it is a self-governing institution

Figure 5. Most important skills among employees. Denmark.

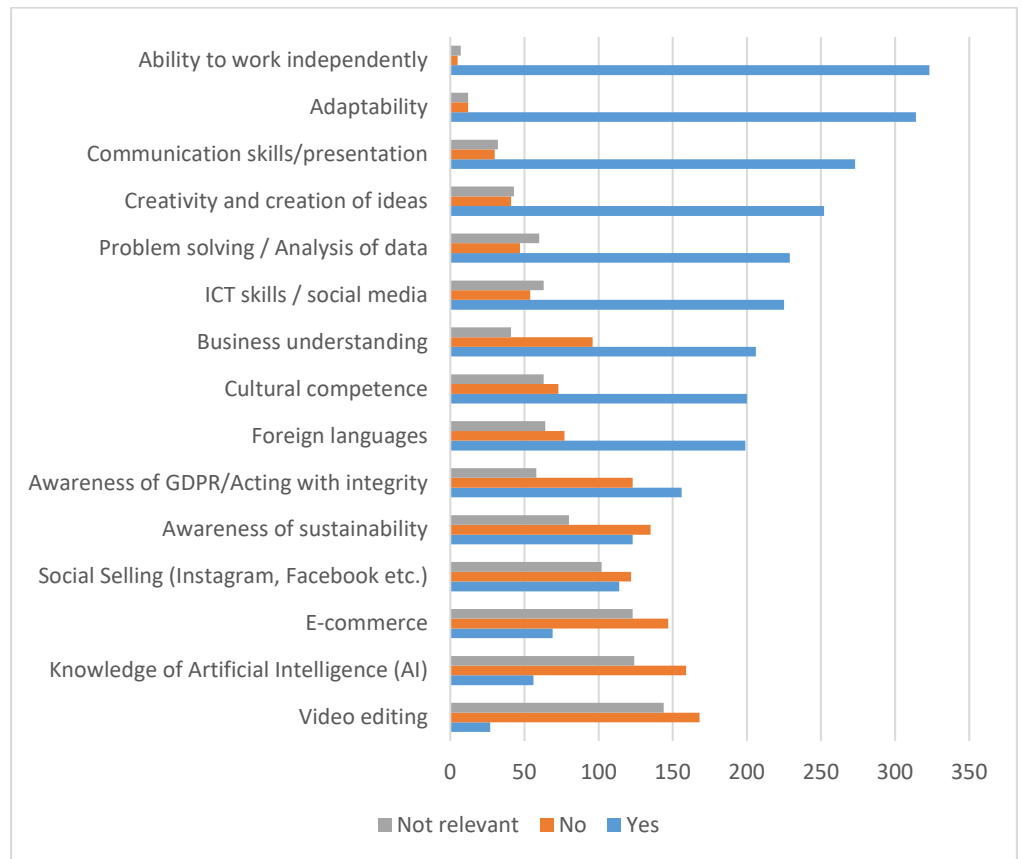
Note: The respondents were asked the question: “Which skills and competences do you consider the most important among your employees for conducting your business?” The companies should then choose the importance of each skill (the possible skills appear from figure 1), and they were able to answer on a scale from 1-5, where 1 denotes “not important”, og 5 denotes “important”. In the figure, the numbers (1-5) are summed up so the skills or competences with the highest values are those that the companies find most important.

Data from Denmark, Growth4SMEs, June 2021

Moreover, what the Danish companies find important with regard to their employees’ skills is quiet similar to the preferences of the Belgian companies. The clearest difference is when it concerns the skill of problem solving, which the Belgian companies rate significantly higher than the Danish. The Danish respondents also mentioned skills such as social skills, business sense, and general knowledge about IT as important.

4.3/ Future competences and skills

The Danish companies were also asked which competences and skills they expect recent graduates to have when they hire them.

Figure 6. Future competences and skills. Denmark.

Note: Number of respondents who have indicated "yes", "no" or "not relevant" to the question: "Which competencies and skills do you expect recent graduates to have when you hire them?". The respondents had different applicable options, which appear from the figure.

Data from Denmark, Growth4SMEs, June 2021

According to figure 6, the Danish companies especially expect the recent graduates to have the ability to work independently, to be flexible and adjust to changing factors, and to possess communication skill. The top three most important skills/competences among recent graduates in Denmark are identical to the top three most important future competences and skills in Belgium (figure 4). Moreover, ability to work independently, and adaptability are also in the top three among the Norwegian SMEs (figure 2).

Furthermore, the top five most important skills among recent graduates are almost identical to the top five most important skills among employees in Denmark (figure 5). This means that the employers value almost the same skills/competences among recently qualified employees as among their regular employees. The only difference is

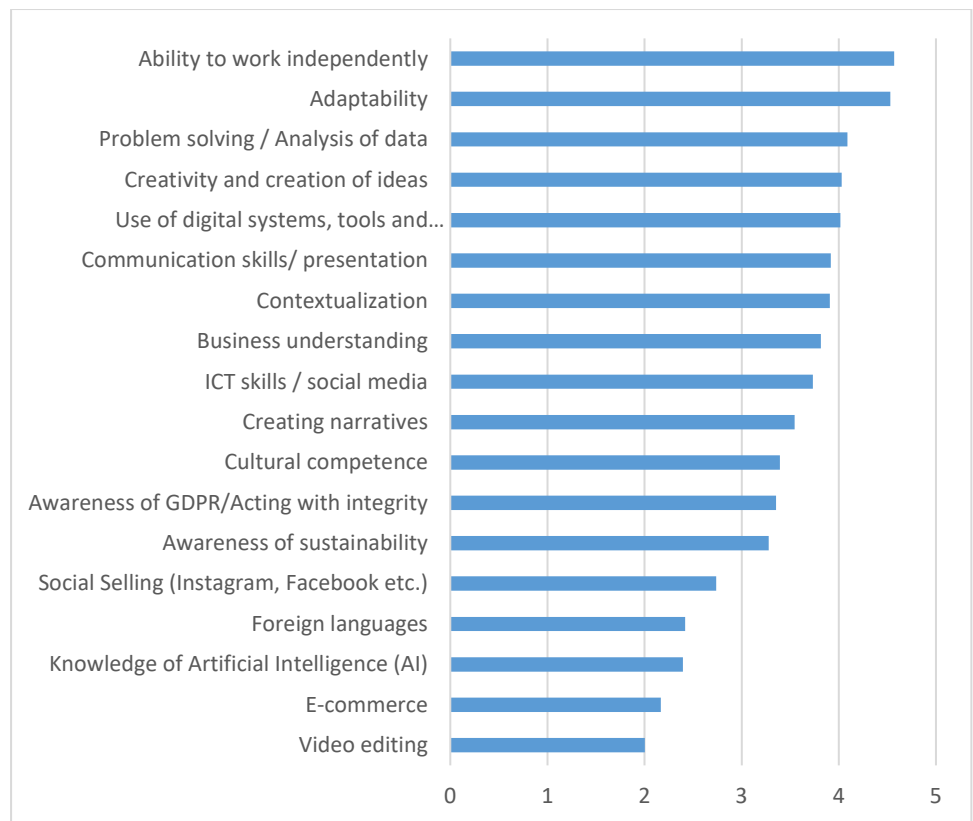
business understanding: the employers do not expect the recent graduates to have as much business understanding as regular employees. Instead they expect the recent graduates to be able to solve problems (5th most important skill) cf. figure 6.

Skills such as 'awareness of GDPR' and 'awareness of sustainability' divide the employers since about half of the employers find these skills important while the other half do not. Furthermore, most of the SMEs do not find knowledge of Artificial Intelligence and video editing important. The respondents were also able to type down other competences they expect recent graduates to have, when they hire them. Again, several companies mention social skills such as openness and cooperation as important competences among recent graduates.

5.0 Skills and competences across the borders

In this section, the data from the three countries is compiled to show which skills and competences the SMEs find most important among their employees across the borders. In figure 7, the Belgian, Norwegian, and Danish employers' replies to the question about, which skills and competences, they find the most important among their employees, appear. To make the responses from all three countries comparable, I have taken the average scores of the companies' responses.

Figure 7. Most important skills among employees. Norway, Belgium, and Denmark.



Note: The respondents were asked the question: "Which skills and competences do you consider the most important among your employees for conducting your business?" The companies should then choose the importance of each skill (the possible skills appear from figure 7), and they were able to answer on a scale from 1-5, where 1 denotes "not important", og 5 denotes "important". The mean scores from all three countries appear from the figure.

Data from Denmark, Belgium and Norway, June 2021

Across the countries, ability to work independently, adaptability and problem solving are the most valued competences among the employees according to the employers in the three different countries. Conversely, knowledge of AI, E-commerce and video editing are the least important skills.²

Table 1. Future competences and skills. Norway, Belgium, and Denmark.

	BELGIUM			NORWAY			DENMARK		
	Yes	No	NR	Yes	No	NR	Yes	No	NR
Ability to work independently	96%	2%	2%	93%	7%	0%	96%	1%	2%
Adaptability	96%	2%	2%	100%	0%	0%	93%	4%	4%
Communication skills/presentation	94%	6%	0%	79%	21%	0%	81%	9%	10%
Problem solving / Analysis of data	91%	4%	4%	93%	0%	7%	68%	14%	18%
Use of digital systems, tools and applications	91%	6%	2%	71%	29%	0%			
Creativity and creation of ideas	89%	9%	2%				75%	12%	13%
ICT skills / social media	81%	9%	11%	86%	14%	0%	66%	16%	18%
Awareness of GDPR	67%	26%	7%				46%	36%	17%
Awareness of sustainability	67%	20%	13%	50%	36%	14%	36%	40%	24%
Foreign languages	40%	30%	30%	14%	64%	21%	59%	23%	19%
Contextualization	40%	42%	18%	100%	0%	0%			
Cultural competence	39%	28%	33%	86%	0%	14%	60%	22%	19%
Business understanding	38%	21%	40%	50%	50%	0%	60%	28%	12%
Creating narratives	36%	47%	17%	93%	0%	7%			
Social Selling (Instagram, Facebook etc.)	20%	38%	42%	79%	21%	0%	34%	36%	30%
Knowledge of Artificial Intelligence (AI)	20%	52%	28%	14%	71%	14%	17%	47%	37%
E-commerce	9%	49%	43%	7%	71%	21%	20%	43%	36%
Video editing	2%	50%	48%	23%	69%	8%	8%	50%	42%

Note: Percentage of respondents who have indicated "yes", "no" or "not relevant" to the question: "Which competencies and skills do you expect recent graduates to have when you hire them?". The respondents had different applicable options, which appear from the figure.

'NR' = Not relevant

Data from Belgium, Norway, and Denmark, Growth4SMEs, June 2021

² It has to be noticed that the Danish companies did not have the response categories about 'contextualization', 'creating narratives' and 'use of digital systems, tools and applications'. Furthermore the Norwegian companies did not have the response categories about 'Awareness of GDPR/Acting with integrity' and 'Use of digital systems, tools and applications / ICT skills'.

Table 1 shows the percentage distribution of the companies' responses to the question about, which competencies and skills they expect recent graduates to have when they hire them – in Belgium, Norway and Denmark respectively. Across all three countries, 'Ability to work independently' and 'adaptability' are the skills that the SMEs expect recent graduates to possess the most. Also communication skills and creativity are important skills to possess as a recent graduate.

However, Norway differs slightly from the other two countries in the table. For instance the Norwegian companies expect the recent graduates to possess skills such as 'cultural competence', 'creating narratives' and 'social selling'. These skills are not as valued in Belgium and Denmark. In this regard, it must be noticed that only 14 Norwegian companies have answered the survey.

Generally seen across all the three countries, independence and adaptability – but also communication skills and problem solving – are the most important skills/competence to possess – both as an experienced employee in a firm and as a recent graduate, who is seeking employment.

