

“Lost in translation”. Soft skills development in European countries*

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Abstract: The world of work is changing profoundly, at a time when the global economy is not creating a sufficient number of jobs. Many documents issued by the EU and various researches, carried out by companies and human resources experts, point out that the so-called “soft” skills are closely connected with employability, particularly for young people entering the labour market. At present, EU countries have different methodologies and approaches to the teaching and assessment of soft skills. Another obstacle is represented by the absence of a common language. There are different ways of naming ‘soft skills’, different definitions of them, different manners of classifying and clustering them. The article explores some classifications of soft skills and presents a collection of best practices and methods for teaching and learning them at University level, taking into account different perspectives and basing on the results of two European projects focused on this topic. The final goal is to provide an analysis aimed at the identification of the most important soft skills needed for a successful transition from University education to the labour market. The analysis includes a brief chronological excursus on relevant studies on the subject, a review of current literature on employability skills, quantitative (surveys) and qualitative (focus groups) researches from Europe and Third Countries, identifying the range of soft skills relevant for newly graduates. The aim of this overview is to enhance understanding of soft skills and to indicate key areas for soft skill development at University level.

Keywords: soft skills; employability; university; terminology; taxonomies; best practices.

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I. Introduction

In the last few years many studies, research reports, surveys, even newspapers articles highlighted a problem of the labour market: they reported a skill shortage among employers. In the USA, in 2011, more than 600,000 positions in manufacturing went unfulfilled due to a skill shortage in employees and this skill shortage concerned mainly non-technical skills, work ethic, punctuality and professionalism.¹

According to the ManPower Group’s *Talent Shortage Survey* (2012),² nearly 20% of employers considered the lack of soft skills as one of the key reasons they couldn’t hire needed employees. The American survey *Career Builder*, conducted in 2014 over a sample of 2,138 human resource managers, indicate that soft skills are just as important as hard skills, ranking at the first position the skill “work ethic”, with 73% of preferences, at the second position “reliability”, again with 73% of answers, and third “positive attitude”, with 72%.³

In a research carried out by McKinsey,⁴ that involved more than 8,000 people in eight European countries (France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom), one-third of employers said that lack of skills is causing major business problems in the form of cost, quality, or time. Furthermore skill gaps cause the most problems in countries with the highest youth unemployment (i.e. Italy, Greece, and Spain). A major reason that students do not gain skills employers are seeking is that all three constituents — students, employers, and educators — are not speaking the same figurative language. The report shows that universities and companies

¹ Deloitte, *Boiling Point? The Skills Gap in U.S. Manufacturing*, 2011, accessed March, 31, 2016, <http://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/us/Documents/manufacturing/us-indprod-pip-2011-skills-gap-report-01142011.pdf>.

² Manpower Group, *Talent Shortage Survey*, 2012, accessed March, 31, 2016, http://www.manpowergroup.us/campaigns/talent-shortage-2012/pdf/2012_Talent_Shortage_Survey_Results_US_FINALFINAL.pdf.

³ Many studies, in Italy too, reported a skill mismatch depending on the educational mismatch. Employers often claim that university graduates are well prepared in their disciplines, but lack general competences. Practical skills are lacking among graduates. Among them: ISFOL (Istituto per la formazione e il lavoro), *Rapporto ISFOL 2012. Le competenze per l’occupazione e la crescita* (Roma: ISFOL, 2012). IULM, CRUI, Centromarca, *Osservatorio sulle professioni. Prima indagine sulla formazione dei neolaureati ed esigenze d’impresa* (Milano: Università IULM, 2012).

⁴ Mona Mourshed, Jigar Patel, and Katrin Suder, *Education to Employment: Getting Europe’s Youth into Work*, McKinsey & Company, accessed March, 31, 2016, <http://www.mckinsey.com/industries/social-sector/our-insights/converting-education-to-employment-in-europe>.

often move in “parallel universes”: while the majority of education providers (74%) are confident that their graduates are prepared for work, yet only 35% of employers have the same opinion. As far as young people are concerned, only 42% believe they have received adequate training for work, and only 30% finds temporary employment after graduation.

The report *Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Access, Retention and Employability*, published in 2014,⁵ highlights that, while employability of newly graduates is a topic of considerable priority in higher education policy debates, the approaches and levels of engagement differ considerably. Some countries conflate employability with employment by taking an employment-centred approach that focuses primarily on graduate employment rates. Others put the accent on skills development, emphasising the competences relevant for the labour market that need to be acquired through higher education. Several countries combine these two perspectives.

Skill development is one of the four main areas of the European Union’s flagship initiative *An agenda for new skills and new jobs*,⁶ and the focus of the more recent *Rethinking education strategy. Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes*.⁷ According to those documents, companies need a more skilled workforce and opportunities should be given to young people to develop those soft skills, such as entrepreneurial skills, coping skills (i.e. the capacity to deal with a problem in a creative way), learning to learn and other skills that will help university students to make a successful transition from full-time education to entering the labour market.

One of the strategic actions for development, recommended by those EU documents, is the university curricula reform to tailor them with the requests coming from the labour market. Nevertheless, relevant weaknesses are still detectable. In fact, the programs of most European universities are still rooted on teaching traditional scientific skills rather than paying attention to soft and complementary skills.

In this article, basing on a literature review and on the results of two European projects, we focus on the identification of the most important soft

⁵ European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, *Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Access, Retention and Employability 2014*, Eurydice Report (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2014).

⁶ European Commission, *An agenda for new skills and new jobs in Europe: Pathways towards full employment*, 2012, accessed March, 31, 2016, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52010DC0682&from=EN>.

⁷ EC (European Commission), *Rethinking education strategy: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes*, 2012, accessed March, 31, 2016, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52012DC0669&from=EN>.

skills needed for a successful transition from University education to the labour market.

The questions we want to answer are the following:

1. What are soft skills (how can they be defined) and what are the different ways of calling and clustering them?
2. What are the skills most required by the labour market and which initiatives have been carried out in different European countries to enhance soft skills development at the undergraduate level and to foster employability?
3. Which methodologies can be used to teach and learn soft skills at undergraduate level?

The first part of this article provides a brief chronological excursus of relevant studies on the theme of soft skills, in order to outline the dominant theoretical approaches to the theme. In the second paragraph, the results of quantitative (surveys) and qualitative (focus groups) analysis, carried out during two European projects, are illustrated in order to highlight which soft skills are mostly required by the labour market. The third part presents a comparative analysis of the state of the art of soft skills researches and initiatives in different European countries. Finally, the article presents a collection of best practices and methods for teaching and learning soft skills at University level, taking into account different perspectives — mainly the pedagogical, philosophical and psychological ones — and mapping some best practices in halls of residence.

II. Relevant studies towards taxonomy of soft skills

II.1. *Different names and definitions*

There are various ways of naming soft skills, also called social skills, transversal competences, social competences, generic competences, even basic and life skills. Some international research projects or institutions prefer the term “21st century skills”, whereas the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) uses the terms “key competencies” (2003)⁸ and,

⁸ OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), *Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations (DeSeCo)*, *Summary of the final report Key Competencies for a Successful Life and a Well-functioning Society* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2003).

more recently, “skills for social progress” (2015).⁹ In Europe different countries use different denominations, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1
Different names for soft skills in some European countries

Countries	Denominations
Austria	<i>Schlüsselkompetenzen</i> (key competencies)
Belgium	Belgium fr.: <i>compétences transversales</i> . (transversal competencies) Belgium nl.: <i>Sleutelcompetenties</i> (key competencies)
Denmark	<i>Nøglekompetence</i> (key competencies)
England	key skills (England, Ireland) core skills (Scotland) life skills, key transferable skills, cross competencies
France	<i>compétences transversales</i>
Germany	<i>Schlüsselkompetenzen</i> (key competencies), <i>übergreifende Kompetenzen</i> (general competencies)
Italy	Competenze trasversali
Portugal	<i>competências essenciais</i> (essential competencies), <i>competências transversais ou genéricas</i> (transversal or generic competencies)
Spain	<i>competencias genéricas</i>

Some authors identify soft skills with EI (*Emotional Intelligence*) or EQ (*Emotional Quotient*), i.e. the “emotional side” of human beings in opposition to the IQ (Intelligent Quotient).¹⁰ One might debate if soft skills like “critical thinking” or “problem solving” might be considered emotional skills. Some authors call them “non cognitive skills”¹¹ but, as a matter of fact, soft skills

⁹ OECD, *Skills for Social Progress. The Power of Social and Emotional Skills*. OECD Skills Studies (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2015).

¹⁰ André Iland, *Soft skills. Be professionally proactive* (Iland Business Pages, 2013). Verma Shalini, *Enhancing Employability @ Soft Skills* (Chandigarth-Delhi-Chennai: Pearson, 2013).

¹¹ James J. Heckman and Yona Rubinstein, “The Importance of Noncognitive Skills: Lessons from GED Testing Program”, *The American Economic Review* 91(2), Papers and Proceedings of the Hundred Thirteenth Annual Meeting of the American Economic Association (May, 2001): 145-149.

include both social/interpersonal skills and methodological skills or meta-competences, i.e. the capacity to work on competences, to reframe and transfer them from one field to another, even from informal to formal learning. Soft skills must also be conceptualized in a broad sense, as competences transferable from job to job, from company to company, from one economic sector to another.¹²

A further issue is connected with the doubt if those skills might be trained or can be considered “innate”. According to Heckman and Kautz¹³ “soft skills [are] personality traits, goals, motivations, and preferences that are valued in the labour market, in school, and in many other domains [...]”. They are “a mix of dispositions, understandings, attributes and practices”.¹⁴

Knight and Page¹⁵ define soft skills as “wicked competences,” as it is very difficult to define them, because they can assume different forms in different contexts and they keep developing along the entire lifetime.¹⁶

In the Mass project, soft skills were defined as “intra- and inter-personal (socio-emotional) skills, essential for personal development, social participation and workplace success”.¹⁷

Haselberger and other authors, within the ModEs project, proposed another definition:¹⁸

Soft Skills represent a dynamic combination of cognitive and meta-cognitive skills, interpersonal, intellectual and practical skills. Soft skills

¹² EC (European Commission), *Transferability of Skills across Economic Sectors: Role and Importance for Employment at European Level* (Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, 2011).

¹³ James J. Heckman and Tim Kautz, “Hard Evidence on Soft Skills,” *Labour Economics* 19, n° 4 (2013): 452.

¹⁴ Mantz Yorke, *Employability in higher education: What it is – what it is not*, Learning and employability series 1 (York, UK: The Higher Education Academy, 2006), 26.

¹⁵ Peter Knight and Anna Page, *The Assessment of “Wicked” Competences*, Report to the Practice Based Professional Learning Centre, 2007, accessed March, 31, 2016, [http://www.open.ac.uk/opencetl/sites/www.open.ac.uk.opencetl/files/files/ecms/web-content/knight-and-page-\(2007\)-The-assessment-of-wicked-competences.pdf](http://www.open.ac.uk/opencetl/sites/www.open.ac.uk.opencetl/files/files/ecms/web-content/knight-and-page-(2007)-The-assessment-of-wicked-competences.pdf).

¹⁶ Cristiano Ciappei and Maria Cinque, *Soft skills per il governo dell’agire* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2014).

¹⁷ Konstantinos Kechagias, ed., *Teaching and Assessing Soft Skills* (Thessaloniki: 1st Second Chance School of Thessaloniki, 2011), 33.

¹⁸ David Haselberger, Petra Oberhuemer, Eva Pérez, Maria Cinque, and Fabio Davide Capasso, *Mediating Soft Skills at Higher Education Institutions* (ModEs project: Lifelong Learning Programme. 2012), 67, accessed March, 31, 2016, <http://www.euca.eu/en/prs/modes-handbook.aspx>.

help people to adapt and behave positively so that they can deal effectively with the challenges of their professional and everyday life.

We can notice in this definition the expression “dynamic combination” that, as acknowledged by the authors, comes from the Tuning definition of competences:

Competences represent a dynamic combination of knowledge, understanding, skills and abilities. Fostering competences is the object of educational programmes. Competences will be formed in various course units and assessed at different stages.¹⁹

This might lead to a misunderstanding concerning the possible overlapping of the two terms. As a matter of fact, “skill” and “competence” are often used interchangeably, but they are not necessarily synonymous.

The difference between skill and competence was illustrated by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in the DeSeCo Project:

While the concept of competence refers to the ability to meet demands of a high degree of complexity, and implies complex action systems [...] The term skill is used to designate the ability to use one’s knowledge with relative ease to perform relatively simple tasks. We recognize that the line between competence and skill is somewhat blurry, but the conceptual difference between these terms is real.²⁰

Sometimes skills are defined as the “visible” and/or “behavioural” components of a competence. As highlighted by EUCEN Glossary, “skills” indicate the ability to apply knowledge and use know-how to complete tasks and solve problems.²¹ In the context of the European Qualifications Framework, competence is described in terms of *responsibility* and *autonomy* while skills are described as *cognitive* (involving the use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking) or *practical* (involving manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools and tools and instruments).²²

¹⁹ Tuning Educational Structures in Europe, *Competences*, accessed March, 31, 2016, <http://www.unideusto.org/tuningeu/competences.html>.

²⁰ Dominique S. Rychen and Laura H. Salganik (eds.), *Definition and selection of Key Competencies* (Gottingen, Germany: Hogrefe & Huber Publishers, 2000), 10.

²¹ Glossary — Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning accessed March, 31, 2016, <http://www.eucen.eu/EQFpro/GeneralDocs/FilesFeb09/GLOSSARY.pdf>.

²² <https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/en/content/descriptors-page>.

II.2. Classifications

There are different ways of naming soft skills (sometimes called competences or even learning outcomes), different definitions of them, and different manners of classifying and clustering them. Furthermore, the theme of soft skills — or “non technical” skills — sometimes overlaps and intersects already known concepts, like “life skills”, “generic competences”, “key competences”, etc.

In Table 2 a chronological synthesis of some frameworks is presented, in order to outline the different approaches to the theme of soft skills. It synthesizes key studies and their findings emerging through different stages, which help illuminate how the vision of those skills has evolved over time. It also offers insights into how this evolution specifically relates to studies in different fields, conducted in different ways and with different theoretical approaches.

The main frameworks are the following: life skills (WHO);²³ transversal competences (ISFOL);²⁴ key competencies for a successful life and a well-functioning society (OECD);²⁵ key competences for lifelong learning (UE);²⁶ generic competences (Tuning);²⁷ 21st century skills (OECD);²⁸ future work skills (ITF);²⁹ and skills for social progress (OECD).³⁰

²³ WHO (World Health Organization), Life Skills Education in Schools. *Skills for Life*, 1 (Genève: WHO, 1993).

²⁴ ISFOL (Istituto per la formazione e l'orientamento al lavoro), *Competenze trasversali e comportamento organizzativo. Le abilità di base nel lavoro che cambia* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 1994).

ISFOL, *Unità capitalizzabili e crediti formativi. I repertori sperimentali* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 1998).

²⁵ Rychen and Salganik, eds., *Key Competencies...*

²⁶ EU (European Union), *Key Competences for Life Long Learning*, Recommendation the European Parliament and the Council of 18th December 2006, *Official Journal of the European Union* (2006/962/EC), L394/10-18, accessed March, 31, 2016, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:32006H0962>.

²⁷ Julia Gonzalez, Robert Wagenaar, eds., *Universities' contribution to the Bologna Process. An introduction*, 2nd Edition (Bilbao: Publicaciones de la Universidad de Deusto, 2008), accessed March, 31, 2016, http://www.unideusto.org/tuningeu/images/stories/Publications/ENGLISH_BROCHURE_FOR_WEBSITE.pdf.

²⁸ Katerina Ananiadou and Magdalena Claro, “21st Century Skills and Competences for New Millennium Learners in OECD Countries”, *OECD Education Working Papers*, 41 (2009), OECD Publishing, accessed March, 31, 2016, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/218525261154>.

²⁹ IFTF (Institute for the Future), *Future work skills 2020*, 2011, accessed March, 31, 2016, http://www.iftf.org/system/files/deliverable/SR-1382A%20UPRI%20future%20work%20skills_sm.pdf.

³⁰ OECD, *Skills for Social Progress*, 33.

Table 2
Relevant studies toward a taxonomy of skills

Organization	Name	Skills
WHO (World Health Organization) — 1993	<i>Life skills</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — decision-making and problem-solving; — creative thinking and critical thinking; — communication and interpersonal skills; — self-awareness and empathy; — coping with emotions and coping with stress.
ISFOL (Istituto per lo Sviluppo della Formazione Professionale dei Lavoratori) — 1994/1998	<i>Transversal skills</i>	<p>Useful to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — <i>diagnose</i> the nature of the environment and task (mainly cognitive skills); — <i>relate</i> to people and issues of a specific context (interpersonal or social skills, which is the emotional skill set, cognitive and behavioural styles, but also communication skills); — <i>address</i>, that is to “face, cope, predispose to deal with the environment and the task, both mentally and emotionally...take action on a problem with the best chance of solving it” (be able to set goals, to develop strategies, and to build and implement action plans).
OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) — 2003	<i>Key competencies for a successful life and a well-functioning society</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — <i>using tools interactively</i>, that includes the capacity to use language, symbols and texts interactively, use knowledge and information interactively, use technology interactively; — <i>interacting in socially homogenous group</i>, i.e. relate well to others, cooperate, work in teams, manage and resolve conflicts; — <i>acting autonomously</i>, includes key competencies that empower individuals to manage their lives in meaningful and responsible ways by exercising control over their living and working conditions (for example, form and conduct life plans and personal projects, defend and assert rights, interests, limits and needs

Organization	Name	Skills
EU (European Union) — 2006	<i>Key competences for lifelong learning</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — communication in the mother tongue; — communication in foreign languages; — mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology; — digital competence; — learning to learn; — social and civic competences; — sense of initiative and entrepreneurship; — cultural awareness and expression.
Tuning Educational Structures — 2008	<i>Generic competences</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — <i>instrumental competences</i>, i.e. cognitive abilities, methodological abilities, technological abilities and linguistic abilities; — <i>interpersonal competences</i>, i.e. individual abilities like social skills (social interaction and co-operation); — <i>systemic competences</i>, i.e. abilities and skills concerning whole systems (combination of understanding, sensibility and knowledge; prior acquisition of instrumental and interpersonal competences required).
OECD — 2009	<i>21st century skills</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — <i>Information</i> — “Information as source” (searching, selecting, evaluating and organizing) and “Information as product” (restructuring and modelling of information and the development of own ideas/knowledge); — <i>Communication</i> — “Effective communication” (sharing and transmitting the results or outputs of information) and “Collaboration and virtual interaction” (reflecting on others’ work, creation of communities); — <i>Ethics</i> — “Social responsibility” (applying criteria for a responsible use at personal and social levels).

Organization	Name	Skills
IFTF (Institute for the Future) — 2011	<i>Future work skills 2020</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — sense making; — social intelligence; — novel and adaptive thinking; — cross cultural competency; — computational thinking; — new media literacy; — transdisciplinarity; — design mindset; — cognitive load management; — virtual collaboration.

II.3. Analysis and comparison of the frameworks

As we have seen, there are a number of different ways to identify soft skills, different ways of classifying and clustering them. We can identify some differences among the different clusters presented, in particular among “generic skills”, “key skills/competences” and “basic skills”.

The first observation is that “generic skills” are skills that are applicable and useful in various contexts, and thus they can be supposedly transferred among different work occupations. They include soft skills and additional abilities, such as literacy, numeracy, technology use etc. Soft skills are considered a subset of generic skills.

The expression “key competencies” refers to those generic skills that warrant special recognition for their outstanding importance and applicability to the various areas of human life (educational and occupational, personal and social). Indeed, the adjectives ‘generic’ and ‘key’ are sometimes used as synonyms. In one of its papers, the Information Network on Education in Europe, Eurydice, outlines its position as follows:

Despite their differing conceptualisation and interpretation of the term in question, the majority of experts seem to agree that for a competence to deserve attributes such as ‘key’, ‘core’, ‘essential’ or ‘basic’, it must be necessary and beneficial to any individual and to society as a whole.³¹

“Basic skills” are not the same as “key competencies”. Most experts usually talk about “basic skills” when referring to the sub-group of generic or key competencies that are instrumentally essential in a given culture for every person and job, and particularly as we use ‘basic’ skills to communicate with one

³¹ Eurydice, *Key competencies* (Brussels: Eurydice, 2002).

another and for continuous learning. Classic examples of basic skills are: carrying out basic arithmetical calculations (adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing), and reading and writing in one's mother tongue. Since the 1990s, at least two more basic skills, the outcomes of both economic globalisation and accelerated technical progress, have come to the fore: speaking foreign languages and using electronic Information and Communication Technologies (ICT).

Different generic/key/basic skills schemes have been developed in many countries. In some countries, more than one scheme has been developed, either sponsored by different organizations or because the original scheme has been modified as a result of experience. These schemes represent taxonomies of skills, to varying levels of complexity, and as taxonomies, they are informative about the theoretical bases (most of which are tacit) that formed the foundations for the development of these schemes.

As far as the identification of the skills is concerned, three approaches can be identified in the delineation of them. First, skills have been identified by employer organizations through interviews with and focus groups of employer representatives and reviews of other schemes. Second, skills have been identified through analyses of the skills enacted by practitioners in workplaces. Third, a discipline-based approach has been taken in the DeSeCo Project in which academics from six discipline groups were commissioned to propose lists of generic skills.³²

There is no one definitive list of generic skills; instead, there are a number of lists. Each list has been compiled under the influence of both global and local factors and reflects a particular situation. Some common elements are the following:

- *Basic/fundamental skills*, such as literacy, using numbers, using technology
- *People-related skills*, such as communication, interpersonal, teamwork, customer-service skills
- *Conceptual/thinking skills*, such as collecting and organizing information, problem-solving, planning and organizing, learning-to-learn skills, thinking innovatively and creatively, systems thinking
- *Personal skills and attributes*, such as being responsible, resourceful, flexible, able to manage own time, having self-esteem
- *Skills related to the business world*, such as innovation skills, enterprise skills

³² Rychen and Salganik, eds., *Definition and selection of Key...*

- *Skills related to the community*, such as civic or citizenship knowledge and skills

It might be discussed which of these skills belong to the category of “soft skills”. Nevertheless, all the discussion reveals the importance that the modern approaches give to the development and assessment of soft skills.

II.4. *Beyond employability: a ‘holistic’ approach*

In 2015 OECD produced a report, *Skills for social progress: The power of social and emotional skills*,³³ that presents a synthesis of the OECD’s analytical work on the role of socio-emotional skills and proposes strategies to raise them. It analyses the effects of skills on a variety of measures of individual well-being and social progress, which covers aspects of our lives that are as diverse as education, labour market outcomes, health, family life, civic engagement and life satisfaction. The report discusses how policy makers, schools and families facilitate the development of socio-emotional skills through intervention programs, teaching and parenting practices. Not only does it identify promising avenues to foster socio-emotional skills, it also shows that these skills can be measured meaningfully within cultural and linguistic boundaries.

This report is mainly focused on development at school and not at university because social and emotional skills are more malleable between early childhood and adolescence; however it is interesting because it provides information about the skills that foster lifetime success, learning contexts that drive skill formation, national approaches, policies and assessment methodologies.

Emotional intelligence studies also support the hypothesis that interpersonal skills are more likely to predict successful careers³⁴ and that they are necessary for the increasing use of teams, the rapid pace of globalization, the capacity to dialogue in a cross-cultural environment, and the growing need to retain talent in organizations.

As highlighted by the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, in *Not for profit*, “we increasingly treat education as though its primary goal were to teach students to be economically productive rather than to think critically and become knowledgeable and empathetic citizens. This focus on profitable skills has eroded our ability to criticize authority, reduced our sympathy with

³³ OECD, *Skills for Social Progress* [cit.].

³⁴ Daniel Goleman, *Emotional intelligence* (New York: Bantam, 1995). Daniel Goleman, and Richard Boyatzis, “Social Intelligence and the Biology of Leadership,” *Harvard Business Review*, September (2008): 74-81.

the marginalized and different, and damaged our competence to deal with complex global problems".³⁵

The American researcher Neil Noddings claims that "schools shouldn't serve merely as factories for the mass production of an able labour force".³⁶ In addition to professional success — perhaps even as a prerequisite for it — schools must equip students with the tools they need to flourish as well-rounded human beings.

Adapting a framework created by UNESCO for a study on transversal skills in the Asia-Pacific Region,³⁷ we can say that the need for soft skills is not only connected with employability but it intersects different discourses (the economic, the social and the humanity discourses) and different perspectives (the global, national and personal ones). Sometimes the drivers for the integration of soft skills into education are built upon a combination of these discourses and perspectives.

Table 3
Rationale for Integration of Transversal Competencies into Education

	Economic Discourse	Social Discourse	Humanity Discourse
Global Perspective	Competitiveness	Social Progress	Global Citizenship
National Perspective	GDP* Growth	HDI** Growth	National identity
Personal Perspective	Employability	Community	'Holistic' formation

Source: adapted from Unesco Asia-Pacific Education Research Institutes Network (ERI-Net), *Regional Study on Transversal Competencies in Education Policy and Practice*, Regional Report (Paris: Unesco, 2015).

* GDP: Gross domestic Product

** HDI: Human Development Index

At a glance, the economic discourse appears as the most powerful driver to integrate soft skills in the university curriculum, both in a global and national perspective, i.e. to boost economic development and increase international competitiveness, but also to improve employability of young people (personal perspective). This stems from the implicit factor of the

³⁵ Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton University Press, 2010).

³⁶ Neil Noddings, *Happiness and Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

³⁷ UNESCO Asia-Pacific Education Research Institutes Network (ERI-Net), *Regional Study on Transversal Competencies in Education Policy and Practice*, Regional Report (Paris: UNESCO, 2015).

changing workplace, and hence, the changing expectations placed on new young employees. At the same time, some researches also emphasise the social and humanity discourse in which education is seen as a vehicle for fostering a number of social, ethical, and moral attributes among students, such as national identity, respect for diversity, tolerance, and empathy. From the research it is made clear that all countries and economies seek the integration of transversal competencies as imperative to the holistic development of their youth, and consequently their societies. All reports mention changing global and social contexts as important factors driving the promotion of soft skills / transversal competencies as these are seen as integral to fostering the attitudes and inter-personal attributes necessary to manage and cope with, for example, uncertainty and changes.

III. The soft skills most required by the labour market

III.1. *Quantitative analysis*

In 2009, EucA (European University College Association) launched the ModEs (*Modernizing Higher Education Through Soft Skills Accreditation*) project, financed by the EU program “Lifelong Learning Erasmus” and involving 15 partners from 10 countries for three years. The project was aimed at integrating a common European program on soft skills in the academic curricula. The two main products of the ModEs project were represented by a *Handbook*,³⁸ containing a set of guidelines to teach soft skills at the undergraduate level, and a prototype of a “serious game” in different languages to develop soft skills. The main targets of these deliverables were university teachers, trainers, and student affairs and services educators.

In order to identify and group the soft skills required in the professional field, the experts in professional skills from the different partner organisations involved in the ModEs project developed a list of skills and their definitions from a literature review and their professional experience. This list was validated and reviewed within the project consortium, prior to validation by companies. Thus, the list and the definitions of the soft skills have been subject to an internal validation which provided: *validity*, what refers to whether the meaning of the skill is in line with the reality to be defined; *importance*: the relevance of the skills in the business environment; *proposal*

³⁸ Haselberger et al., *Mediating Soft Skills at Higher Education Institutions*, ModEe project: Lifelong Learning Programme, 2012, accessed March, 31, 2016, <http://www.euca.eu/en/prs/modes-handbook.aspx>.

of inclusion: both observations and modifications to the soft skills included in the preliminary list, as well as the possibility to add, delete or merge skills.

To complement the information the partners of the project counted on the cooperation of people working in the area of human resources of companies, and persons responsible for staff professional development from different sectors, operating in Spain, Italy, Slovenia, Latvia and Malta. This stage has been developed through the design and provision to the companies of an on-line questionnaire. For this survey a Likert-type scale has been selected. A total of 500 companies operating in different sectors of activity (from Spain, Italy, Slovenia, Latvia and Malta) assessed the importance of the skills included in the on-line questionnaire.

Additionally, a total of 35 experts coming from different European countries — with academic or consultancy background — determined the relative importance of the skills required and their grouping, according to the affinity of the actions that can be undertaken to contribute to their development. For this exercise, the experts were provided with the information on the results from the on-line questionnaires to the companies. For the skills clustering activity, the experts used the Concept Mapping methodology and transformed qualitative data into quantitative information to be treated with statistical techniques. As part of the process, data are structured, quantified and analysed using statistical methods including Multidimensional Scaling (MDS) and Hierarchical Cluster Analysis.

The result was a list of 22 skills divided into three main groups:

- *Personal skills*, i.e. Learning skills, Tolerance to stress, Professional ethics, Self-awareness, Commitment, Life balance, Creativity/Innovation
- *Social skills*, i.e. Communication, Teamwork, Contact network, Negotiation, Conflict Management, Leadership, Culture Adaptability
- *Content-reliant/Methodological skills*, i.e. Customer/User orientation, Continuous improvement, Adaptability to change, Results orientation, Analytical skills, Decision making, Management skills, Research and info management

III.2. *Qualitative analysis*

A qualitative analysis on the skill gap was carried out in a further project, eLene4work (*e-Learning for work*), that started in 2015 and is still going on.³⁹

³⁹ The website of the project is the following: <http://elene4work.eu>.

The eLene4work project aims at helping students develop the soft skills mostly required by companies and at helping companies exploit the digital talents of new employers and young workers. eLene4work then proposes a strategic partnership among universities, whose goal is to test and monitor the possibility offered by MOOCs (Massive online courses) and OERs (Open Educational Resources) to fill the gaps between the university and the labour market.

One of the main Outputs of this project is represented by a report, *Which soft skills do students have and which should they have?*, that describes and compares qualitative data about soft skills gathered through focus groups carried out in 9 partner countries: Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Spain, UK.⁴⁰

Focus Group meetings were organised with 2 stakeholders groups:

1. Students and young workers (FG1)
2. Employers, Human resources managers, Higher education teachers (FG2)

For each target focus groups were organized in two rounds. During the first round participants were asked to answer a set of questions aimed at investigating on the meaning that the different stakeholders attribute to the expression “soft skills”, on the importance of them in the labour market and on the skill gaps that newly graduates and young workers might have in these areas. In each partner countries the same sets (one for each group) of questions were used during meetings, in order to make it possible to compare the results in all countries.

The second meeting with both groups was devoted to share and discuss results of first meeting in the opposite group (Impressions from the results about soft skills from FG1 and FG2). It means that students and young workers were discussing about main findings from first meeting of employers and Higher education teachers, and employers and Higher education teachers were discussing findings from first meeting with students and young workers.

The expression “soft skills” was illustrated and explained in different ways in different countries by both focus group participants. For example: through analogies, by examples, by opposition to “hard skills”. They were also defined as talents, as something that makes a person different from others, as personal attributes.

The participants to focus group meetings listed a lot of soft skills which are needed by the labour market. The most popular mentioned in most counties are social skills connected with team working, communication, openness etc.

⁴⁰ The complete report is available at this link: <http://elene4work.eu/project-outputs/focus-groups/>.

Business representatives and Higher Education teachers pointed out a lot of gaps concerning soft skills in students. The most important of them were divided into four groups:

- *Social skills*, i.e. teamwork, communication (online but also face-to-face “traditional” communication; all levels: speaking, listening, formal and informal writing), flexibility, openness for constructive feedback and humility (in social contacts students are too self-confident and convinced they know everything)
- *Personal skills*, i.e. empathy (and other competences appropriate for emotional intelligence), honesty, commitment and motivation, openness for new things to learn, curiosity, patience, perseverance, capacity to learn from one’s failure
- “self-skills”, like self-evaluation, self-regulation of the learning process and, as a consequence, capacity to make a conscious career choice
- *Learning skills*, i.e. synthesis, skills of numeracy, ability to absorb in and deeply familiarize the topic, presentation skills

Furthermore, students, as well as business representatives, pointed out a few areas of existing potential in young workers/candidates:

- Ability to search the information quickly and effectively
- New ideas, ways of working and thinking; they have abilities to see and do things in different ways and to innovate and improve existing process
- Effectiveness and productivity, e.g. new ways to work, collaborate, fast communication and right kind of visibility to the organization
- Versatility
- Freshness and agility
- Multitasking methods
- Speed in processing information
- Free of a reputation in the work place

IV. Soft skills development in European countries

IV.1. *A comparative analysis on the state of the art in some European countries*

This comparative analysis was carried out during the already mentioned eLene4work project. The first output of the project was represented by a

comparative analysis on the state of the art situation of soft skills and digital soft skills in different European countries (Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Spain and UK).⁴¹

In order to collect the data from all these countries in a homogenous way, a template was designed and a glossary with the definition of the different soft skills was made available to all the partner institutions in order to share a common framework to work with. Among the results of this work, an overview of the main initiatives carried out in different countries and transnational projects. In the next paragraph some European projects on soft skills are presented.

At a national level, the state of the art on soft skills varies from country to country. While in some countries the topic seems to be very important — and therefore it is easier to find research on it, in other countries this topic is still developing.

In **Belgium**, a very interesting initiative is the U2ES — University to Enterprise and Society “Boost your skills” (University of Namur).⁴² It presents additional courses (14 credits ECTS in all) focused on soft skills that enrich bachelor/master/PhD students’ university curriculum. Courses focus mainly on organisation skills, communication, personal development. They can last from 6 months to 2/3 years. Another initiative is the HoGent — Centre for Entrepreneurship (University of Gent).⁴³ The Centre carries out practical-oriented research and services for entrepreneurs. Students engaging in the Centre’s activities acquire knowledge about entrepreneurship and receive a certificate as proof of their skills and (first) relevant practical experience. There are also trainings, like the training on Soft Skills for PhD students (University of Liège).⁴⁴ Considered that not all PhD students will have academic positions, the University of Liège provides them additional courses on soft skills to make them more prepared to enter the labour market. Another initiative is “Logistics in Wallonia — Soft Skills Certificate”.⁴⁵ Trainings focus on flexibility, leadership, team-working, self-development,

⁴¹ A full report of the first output (*Comparative analysis on the state of the art of soft skill and soft skills 2.0*) is available at: <http://elene4work.eu/project-outputs/comparative-analysis/>.

⁴² U2ES — University to Enterprise and Society “Boost your skills” (University of Namur), <http://u2es.unamur.be/introduction>.

⁴³ HoGent — Centre for Entrepreneurship (University of Gent), <http://centrum-voor-ondernemen.be/en/centre-for-entrepreneurship>.

⁴⁴ Training on Soft Skills for PhD students (University of Liège), https://www.ulg.ac.be/cms/c_775258/en/soft-skills-for-researchers.

⁴⁵ Logistics in Wallonia — Soft Skills Certificate <http://www.logisticsinwallonia.be/news/un-nouveau-certificat-pour-renforcer-ses-competences-transversales-et-favoriser-une-insertion>.

interpersonal skills, ability to work in multicultural groups and problem solving capacities. The program is the result of an agreement among the above mentioned universities, the Centre for Long-Life Learning of the University of Liege and “Logistics in Wallonia”, an association of 265 members from different fields (industries, infrastructures management services, research centres). Additional training on soft skills addressed to students of the Haute École Mosane, the Haute École Charlemagne, the Haute École de la province de Liège.

In **Finland** the focus is on life skills. The importance of both working and life skills has been recognized and identified by the various stakeholders (employers, students and universities). Finnish universities have actively developed skill studies in the recent years.⁴⁶ Working and life skills were categorized as: 1) academic knowledge building and academic thinking 2) integration of knowledge 3) social and communication skills 4) self-regulation skills 5) leadership and 6) networking skills. Projects in this country intend to develop new ways to organize university courses based on collaborative knowledge creation and digital technology. Päivi Tynjälä⁴⁷ (Head of research group in The Finnish Institute for educational research, University of Jyväskylä) has studied how university teaching may develop skills needed in working life in Finland. The solution for increasing expertise and working and life teaching is presented as the so-called integrative pedagogy, where courses are organized in such a way that they combine all the expertise components. For example, the internship is a good opportunity to implement integrative pedagogy, as long as the training is held in controlled manner so that it includes practical experience and reflection. Other practices that combine theory and meta-cognitive

⁴⁶ Liisa Ilomäki, Minna Lakkala & Kari Kosonen, “Mapping the terrain of modern knowledge work competencies.” A paper presented in a symposium *Generating working life competencies during higher education* at the 15th Biennial EARLI conference for Research on Learning and Instruction August 27-31, 2013, Munich, Germany, accessed March, 31, 2016, <http://www.earli2013.org/programme/proposal-view/?abstractid=1157>.

Johanna Penttilä, *University student's work orientation. Study contents, career guidance and pictures of the future*. Otus 30/2009. Helsinki: Opiskelijajärjestöjen tutkimussäätiö. Otus, accessed March, 31, 2016, http://ek2010.multiedition.fi/korkeakouluharjoittelijat/liitteet/yo-opiskelijoiden_tyolamaan_orientoituminen.pdf.

Antero Puhakka, “Mapping the skills masters need in their work”. In Puhakka & Tuominen (toim.), *Kunhan kuluu viisi vuotta — ylemmän korkeakoulututkinnon suorittaneiden työurat. Aarresaari-verkoston julkaisusarja*. 61-86, accessed March, 31, 2016, <http://www.aarresaari.net/pdf/Kunhankuluuviisivuotta.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Päivi Tynjälä, “Workplace expertise and higher education pedagogy”, *Aikuiskasvatus* 28, n° 2 2008, 124-127.

elements in pedagogy are problem-based and project-based learning. The ProWo-project (2014)⁴⁸ provides research-based ideas and models about how to advance students’ modern working life competences in university education. During the project, teachers, students, and other stakeholders developed new ways to organize university courses based on collaborative knowledge creation, digital technology and cross-fertilization of practices with working life.

In **France**, the Career Center⁴⁹ is an initiative with the aim of developing soft skills. On the website of the Career Center there is help to find a job and it suggests several transversal skills to develop: leadership, teamwork, problem solving, organization, communication, self-knowledge, motivation and enthusiasm, decision-making and flexibility. Another initiative is the CEDEFI,⁵⁰ an association of the directors of French Engineering Schools, which offers a course to help future PHD students to improve their competences to join a company (80% of PhDs in scientific disciplines are working in enterprises). The curricula includes a part called ‘autonomy and project management’ where some soft skills are taken into account, such as learning skills, adaptability to changes, project management, leadership or communication. Finally, the Reflex Soft Skills Academy⁵¹ is a website with videos to learn to develop soft skills in relation with the book *Reflex soft skills* (Conscientiousness, entrepreneurship, confidence and synergy). A further initiative in the field of soft-skills development is the TalentCampus project.⁵² TalentCampus is one of the programmes supported by the Centre for Research and Higher Education (PRES) Bourgogne Franche-Comté via its Foundation for Scientific Cooperation. TalentCampus is an innovative education programme designed for the development of social competences using soft skills. Proposed in the format of Summer, Winter and Spring schools, TalentCampus aims to develop competences complementary to academic ones: leadership, behaviour in society, emotional intelligence, stress management.

In **Germany**, the topic is considered very relevant and the focus is more on “key skills” that, as we have seen previously, only partially overlap the

⁴⁸ <http://blogs.helsinki.fi/prowo-project/2014/06/29/the-website-of-knork-project-launched/>.

⁴⁹ Career center: <http://www.michaelpage.fr/career-center/developper-competence-transverses.html>.

⁵⁰ CEDEFI, Association of the Directors of French Engineering Schools: <http://www.cdefi.fr/files/files/R%C3%A9f%C3%A9rentiel%20parcours%20Comp%C3%A9tences%20pour%20l'Entreprise.pdf>.

⁵¹ Reflex Soft Skills Academy: <http://reflexsoftskills.fr/>.

⁵² TalentCampus project: <http://www.talent-campus.fr/>.

concept of soft skills. There are many initiatives that stress the importance of key skills and that promote recommendations on how to organize and implement skills in higher education.⁵³ Universities in this country have established centres for key skills or expanded the existing departments to support and promote key skills. Many universities organize the promotion of key competences by setting up interdisciplinary centres (key competences centres). It is a chance for the universities to be visible to the world, get to be known by companies and optimize their reputation. Other universities try to develop the concept of 'Service learning': The professional higher education is connected to projects that respond to actual needs layers of non-profit actors in the region. Companies would more often select the so-called "Key Universities" for enhanced cooperation. The companies are then prepared to support these universities with equipment know-how but also financially.

In **Greece**, there is a general recognition of the importance of soft skills in improving the productivity of the workforce, but there is still quite a degree of ambiguity in defining their boundaries.⁵⁴ In general, soft skills are seen as people-oriented skills and self-management skills. At a national level there are not many initiatives that are dedicated to this problem and most of them are associated with European policy and European funds, like in the case of Poland. The importance of soft skills for enhancing employability, personal fulfilment and social participation is widely accepted. In Greece, the educational institutions have accepted that they should prepare their students for a complex and uncertain society and labour market. While they appear to have accepted their new vocational role, there is considerable confusion over how generic competencies, soft skills, attributes or capabilities should be defined and implemented.

Also in the case of **Italy**, the soft skills development arouses the interest of various stakeholders. Among these, universities play an important role and sometimes offer targeted training, such as MOOCs in the Polytechnic

⁵³ Some examples: <http://www.va-bne.de>, <http://www.egs.uni-bremen.de>.

Society for key competences in Education, Research and practice; <http://www.gesellschaft-fuer-schluessselkompetenzen.de>.

Nexus Impulse für die Praxis "Employability," Von der Leerformel zum Letziel, 2014, www.hrk-nexus.de.

Virtuelle Hochschullandschaft Norddeutschland, "(VHN), Empfehlungen der Arbeitsgruppe Schlüsselkompetenzen," 2007, <https://studieren.de/berblick-soft-skills.0.html>.

⁵⁴ LinkedIn group for Entrepreneurship, Financial Literacy, Skills for employability: <https://www.linkedin.com/grp/home?gid=4272606>.

Facebook page for Entrepreneurship, Financial Literacy, Skills for employability: <https://www.facebook.com/SENJAGREECE/>.

University of Milan. Furthermore, the ManPower Group⁵⁵ carried out a survey in collaboration with the Department of Education and Psychology of the University of Florence in order to create a basis for the development of a national “observatory” on soft skills recognized and required by the labour market. The ManPower Group has identified a set of soft skills connected with the three levels of organizational roles: fundamental operational roles, managerial roles and executive roles. The research found out that for operational roles and entry-level team working and orientation to results are the most requested competences. As concerns managerial roles, the need to provide concrete solutions and / or alternatives to daily problems, by bringing together and harmonizing the contributions of various collaborators is fundamental. Two skills emerge for the executive roles: leadership and strategic vision. The survey also investigated which skills are important for the future and transversal to all the roles. This data is more fragmented since there is no basis of common experience on which to base certain answers or imagine future needs. In general, given the current and changeable working environment, adaptability and integration in the employment context become essential. There are also initiatives aiming at assessing and developing the soft skills needed to enter the labour market⁵⁶ or national policies which intend to regulate the national system of certification of skills.

The subject of the skills required for the labour market is also relevant in **Poland**, where, in the last years, there has been a lot of discussion and research on this subject.⁵⁷ However, there are not many initiatives or policies at a national level in this country, as most of them are associated with

⁵⁵ Manpower Group, *Soft Skills for Talent*, Internal Report, 2014, accessed March, 31, 2016, <http://www.manpowergroup.it/indagine-soft-skills-manpowegroup>.

⁵⁶ POK Project Politecnico di Milano: www.pok.polimi.it. Luiss Skill A Bus/Geek Café: <http://www.luiss.it/studenti/soft-skills-and-training-opportunities/soft-skills-con-cfu>. Competency Centre, Università Cà Foscari, Venezia http://www.unive.it/nqcontent.cfm?a_id=141907. JUMP (Job University Matching Project) promoted by Fondazione RUI <http://www.rui.it/it/pagine/view/jump>.

Project Skill License promoted by Adecco: <http://www.adecco.it/opportunita-speciali/skill-licence/default.aspx>. GIOTTO Project promoted by FederManager (company association for Managers): http://www.manageritalia.it/content/download/Associazione/associazioni/firenze/GIOTTO_2015_Presentazione.pdf.

⁵⁷ GoldenLine (similar to LinkedIn portal) group for Business Trainers and Coaches: http://www.goldenline.pl/grupy/Przedsiębiorcy_biznesmeni/trenerzy-biznesu-szkolenia-miekkie/.

GoldenLine group for measurement of soft skills: <http://www.goldenline.pl/grupy/Zainteresowania/miekkie-kompetencje-pomiar-i-szkolenie/>.

GoldenLine coach group: <http://www.goldenline.pl/grupy/Zainteresowania/coaching-praktyka-oparta-na-dowodach-coaching-ebp/>.

European policies and funds. In Polish universities, soft skills are not well developed, although companies underline the importance of these skills and the soft skills gap. Moreover, there is not a clear definition of soft skills.

Soft skills and digital skills are also very important in **Spain**, as it is reflected by the debates and amount of research on this issue recently.⁵⁸ There is a lot of research coming from Spanish universities, which has treated the topic of how to introduce soft skills in the academic curriculums. However, according to some sources, it is believed that these actions have been taken without having generated enough debate on the issue in order to clarify the concepts around it and to analyse the most appropriate models. The initiatives are not only appearing in the academic context, but also in companies, where there are trainings on soft skills.

Last but not least, the development of soft skills to enhance graduate employability is a major area of concern in the **UK**. This concern is shared by the UK government, employers and higher education institutions, where the Higher Education Academy has a whole department dedicated to employability.⁵⁹ However, it is not easy to find valuable sources in this country, even if there is a number of articles and initiatives on transferrable skills, the development of soft and digital skills and the skills for employability.⁶⁰ As in

⁵⁸ Gobierno de España, Ministerio de empleo y seguridad social, *Estrategia de emprendimiento y empleo joven 2013/2016*, Accessed March, 31, 2016, http://www.empleo.gob.es/ficheros/garantiajuvenil/documentos/EEEJ_Documento.pdf.

Some more examples of this debate are available at the following links:

- http://www.fib.upc.edu/eees/cicleactivitats_08-09/mainColumnParagraphs/05/text_files/file/EvaluacionCompetenciasTransversales.PDF
- <http://excelcon.blogs.upv.es/2014/10/01/cuales-son-las-competencias-transversales-de-la-upv/>
- http://www.uwc.org/uwc_education/short_programmes/spain_2015.aspx
- http://www.aqu.cat/tallers/jornada_ocupadors/index.html#.VUz0Ivntmkp
- https://www.facebook.com/CompetenciasTransversales/info?tab=page_info
- https://www.facebook.com/institutodecompetenciastransversales/info?tab=page_info
- <http://www.habilidadesblandas.com/>

⁵⁹ UK Commission for Employment and Skills, *The Future of Work: Jobs and skills in 2030*, 2014 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/303334/er84-the-future-of-work-evidence-report.pdf.

⁶⁰ Manuel Salas Velasco, "More than just good grades: candidates' perceptions about the skills and attributes employers seek in new graduates," *Journal of Business Economics and Management* 13, n° 3 (2012); 499-517, DOI: 10.3846/16111699.2011.620150.

David Nicol, *The foundation for graduate attributes: developing self-regulation through self-assessment*. QAA Scotland, 2010, accessed March, 31, 2016, <http://www.enhancementthemes.com>.

UK, in **France**, there are also factors which make the research on soft skills difficult, such as the fact that the topic is still emerging and that it is difficult to find a common French term to indicate soft skills and a common definition. In general, the teaching of soft skills in universities is not well developed and there are no national policies on soft skills for higher education. However, soft skills tests are being used in companies in order to hire or promote employees.

IV.2. European projects

In the last few years different projects financed by EU focused on soft skills. The MASS project⁶¹ outlines importance of using different approaches of assessment for different group of people. A variety of approaches were collected, which can be used as a base for an adaptable system for many types of institutes and audiences, for example to prepare disadvantaged learners for employment.

The results of a survey in the E-QUA project,⁶² that maps the various models of mobility in Europe, give exact situation regarding the soft skills on European universities. It was shown that only eight out of twenty-eight universities offer a soft skills development programme. All of them provide the development programme for both local students and incoming mobility students. The developed skills are mostly operative skills, intellectual/practical/relational/managerial skills, personal skills and thought skills. Furthermore, only 50% of incoming mobility students receive a formal acknowledgment of the soft skills programs that could be recognized once back in their home country. In the project „Soft skills — improving professional competence and management“⁶³ is also highlighted a significant lack of training in soft skills. At the same time, if they exist, they are too expensive or physically out of reach of most SMEs. Therefore, the authors

ac.uk/docs/publications/the-foundation-for-graduate-attributes-developing-self-regulation-through-self-assessment.pdf?sfvrsn=28.

Catherine Jane Hack, “Developing an open education resource to develop digital literacy skills for employability in the Life and Health Sciences,” *Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change* 1, n° 1 (2015), accessed March, 31, 2016, <https://journals.gre.ac.uk/index.php/studentchangeagents/article/view/206/211>.

⁶¹ MASS — Measuring and Assessing Soft Skills Project, available at http://www.mass-project.org/attachments/396_MASS%20wp4%20final%20report%20part-1.pdf.

⁶² 7. E-QUA — Erasmus Quality Hosting Framework⁷, available at <http://www.equa-project.eu/en/index.aspx>.

⁶³ Soft skills — improving professional competence and management, available at <http://softskillsproject.com>.

realized the importance of delivering a full range of training materials for free to as many European organizations as possible that can be used to improve the skills of European professionals.

The DAISS project⁶⁴ also supported many unemployed adults in 6 EU countries to gain greater self-awareness in terms of their soft skills. They also supported recognition of the need to develop these skills and competences to meet the needs of an increasingly competitive labour market. The project results consisted in a number of new collaborations where VET providers and employers have worked together. The NESSIE project⁶⁵ brings up a list of skill gaps that are linked to a range of labour market problems: high staff turnover/difficulty recruiting (particularly in the young), lack of ability to compete, inability to cope with change, reasons for staff dismissal and problems in school.

The HISS project⁶⁶ aimed at transferring existing tools on screening soft skills, workplace learning methodologies and mentoring methodologies into a wider range of target-groups (including students, younger job seekers, employers, unemployed adults), sectors of activities and in different countries at European level. The Learning Partnership “Gaining soft skills”⁶⁷ was aimed at developing learning tools and environments for strengthening soft skills and models of supporting learning and training while connecting generations in order to increase employability and motivation for all ages.

The GRASS project⁶⁸ focused on representing soft skills of learners of various ages and at different levels of education in a quantitative, measurable way, so that these skills might become the subject of formal validation and recognition. The S-Cube project⁶⁹ developed an online role play training to help Social Enterprises improve soft skills. The VALEW project⁷⁰ developed a model for certification of competences acquired in non-formal /informal learning environments.

The YES ME project⁷¹ selected international cases concerning the development of transversal and personal skills, both in active labour market

⁶⁴ “Job Matching Diagnostics for Assessing Soft Skills and Work Role Preferences: DAISS”, available at: <http://daiss-project.eu>.

⁶⁵ NESSIE — Network for Soft Skills Innovation for Employment, available at http://www.adam-europe.eu/prj/9722/project_9722_en.pdf.

⁶⁶ HISS — Help to Improve Soft Skills, available at: <http://www.hisstoolbox.eu>.

⁶⁷ “Gaining and strengthening ‘soft skills’ for employment through models of supporting methods (peer coaching and mentoring), available at: <http://www.gainingsoftskills.eu/Index.aspx>

⁶⁸ GRASS — Grading Soft skills, available at: <https://sites.google.com/site/lpgrassproject/>.

⁶⁹ S-Cube — Soft Skills for Social enterprises, available at: <http://www.s-cubeproject.eu>.

⁷⁰ VALEW — Validate Learning at Work, available at: <http://www.valew.eu/>.

⁷¹ YES-ME — Young Employment System for Mobility in Europe, available at: <http://www.yesme.it>.

and training policies, targeted to unemployed youth who lack technical and transversal skills and aimed to the improvement of youth employment and mobility.

V. Teaching and learning soft skills at University level

V.1. *Mapping best practices*

A further step of the already mentioned ModEs project consisted in mapping the best practices and methodologies applied for the development of soft skills through the analysis and comparison of the scenarios in four countries (Italy, Spain, Great Britain and Poland).

Beside this, plenty of information concerning universities and halls of residence was collected with the aim of understanding how the soft skills theme is approached in different institutions. We developed the research in two phases. In the first phase we designed a questionnaire, which was administered in 93 institutions (some universities and many university halls of residence) in 4 countries.

After gathering quantitative data through the survey, a further phase of qualitative research was necessary in order to map the best practices and analyse teaching, learning and assessment methods concerning the development of soft skills in halls of residence. This second phase was carried out through focus groups and interviews with directors of halls of residence and an ethnographic study, i. e. 'a portrait' of the halls of residence, based on information collected through observation on the field. Thus, after constructing an initial framework, giving us a general overview of the nature of soft skill learning and teaching in halls of residence, we carried out further enquiries to gain a more thorough understanding of the practices, gathering evidence about formal, non-formal and informal activities carried out in halls of residence for soft skill development.

From the analysis of the answers collected in the survey (93 institutions in 4 countries), the development of soft skills emerges as a popular theme, especially in Italy, but only half of the halls of residence that completed the survey have a programme for the development of soft skills, and a structured assessment model.

Skills mapping models only exist in Italy and Spain. Their descriptions articulate different circumstances, in line with the universities' and halls of residences' declared goals: intellectual and cultural growth (29,2%); ethical, spiritual and human growth (52,4%); personal growth (22,2%); professional

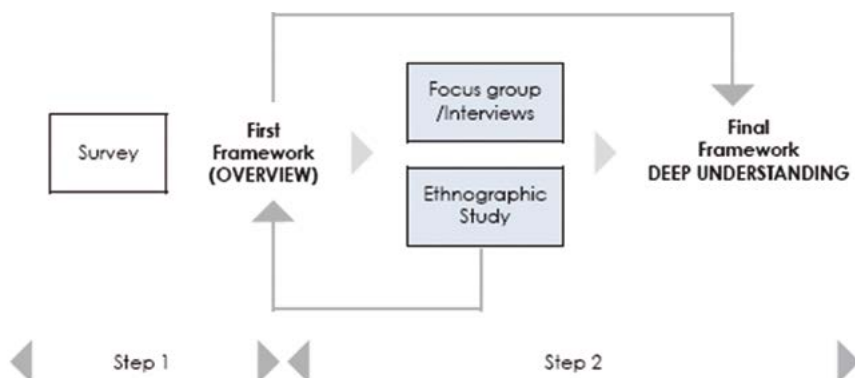


Figure 1

**Soft skills development in halls of residence:
quantitative and qualitative research**

Source: Maria Cinque, *Soft Skills in Action. Halls of Residence as Centres for Life and Learning*. 2nd Revised Edition, Brussels: EucA, 2014.

and academic excellence (32,8%). As far as the different skills are concerned, there are some differences. On the one hand, Italian halls of residence focus on managerial capabilities, while in Spain, personal skills (for example, creativity and innovation, tolerance to stress etc.) receive more attention. In general, the two countries place a lot of importance on relational skills, intellectual abilities and learning skills.

In different countries halls of residence have adopted different policies in regard of students’ development. In Italy, in many halls of residence, courses are mandatory and prescribed according to rules in most institutions. In Spain both universities and halls of residence encourage students to take part in courses but they are not mandatory. In all the English halls participation in soft skill development activities is purely voluntary. In Poland soft skills training is part of non-obligatory studies and training sessions are organised by the students themselves through the Career Office.

Soft skill development is fostered also through international exchanges and the promotion of an intercultural environment. International exchanges are available for students at all the English colleges, in most of the Italian colleges (86.2%) and in the 64.7% of the Spanish ones. Poland does not offer any opportunity in this respect. These data are also in line with the answer collected about students’ nationality: the majority (97.5%) of them comes from Poland. By contrast, the results obtained from the English colleges show a very high percentage of non-English students (79.5%).

Traditional lessons are offered in particular in Italian halls of residence, while they represent just the 25% of the whole training activities in Spain. The other activities may be clustered into two main groups: ‘connection with external professionals and companies’ and ‘internal practical activities’. The percentages of these two categories are similar, even if internal activities reach a higher percentage and this because they are easier to organise and manage.

Connections with universities are present in all the countries in a high percentage, except of Poland. Not all the halls of residence completed this section of the questionnaires and the answers provided were in the most part unspecific. As far as Italy and Spain are concerned, this connection can take the form of: course recognition through credit acknowledgement (13% in Italy and 25% in Spain); jointly course and projects organisation (8.7% in Italy and 16.7% in Spain); agreement about grants and hospitality (39.2% in Italy); collaboration (unspecified) and promotion (26.1% in Italy and 58.3 in Spain).

The qualitative part of the research was performed in different phases. After sending a template for the best practices, we interviewed the directors of the halls of residence (or the people working at educational and cultural activities in the colleges) and gathered direct data, which were compared with the information available on the websites of the halls of residence, annual reports, or internal journals. The product of this qualitative research was used both to inform the *Handbook* of the ModEs project with best practices drawn from the experiences of the colleges, and to gain a deeper understanding of soft skill development in halls of residence. This is often based on very informal practices, and difficult to standardise and formally acknowledge. Only the very effective ‘best practices’ were selected for the *Handbook*. In some cases, the templates were sent back to the interviewees for a double check. All the other activities, mainly the informal ones that were not suitable for inclusion in the ‘best practice template’, were analysed and included in another publication.⁷² This second step of the research was also useful to investigate the pedagogy of soft skills, i.e. innovative teaching and learning methodologies and assessment tools for soft skill development in halls of residence. In this paragraph, a general overview of the results obtained from the qualitative research is presented.

In the halls of residence, soft skills are developed through formal, non-formal, and informal activities that can be divided into four main typologies:

⁷² Maria Cinque, *Soft Skills in Action. Halls of Residence as Centres for Life and Learning* (Brussels: EucA, 2012).

1. Recognised (i.e. accredited according to the European transfer Credit System) soft skills courses organised by universities or at universities by halls of residence's teachers and tutors
2. Recognised soft skills courses organised in halls of residence and colleges — attended by residential and non-residential students
3. Non-recognised soft skills courses organised in halls of residence
4. Soft skills in action, i.e. experiential learning through practical activities

In the first two groups only formal activities are included because they are accredited both if they are carried out at universities and in halls of residence. Consequently, we can have academic, recognised activities and non-academic, recognised activities. The third group is composed of activities that are non-academic and non-recognised, although the structure of the courses is similar to the previous ones. Non-academic, non-accredited and informal activities belong to the fourth group since they do not have the structure of a course but mainly consist in tasks and forms of 'social learning'. Generally soft skill development can be performed under different forms and with various tools: mini-curricula; programmes, workshops and labs; training sessions (sometimes with outdoor activities); projects (internal project works, external cooperation projects etc.); internal and external competitions; cycles of seminars (face to face lessons) and/or colloquia (guest speakers); company visits, journeys (study tours), internship and on the job training; individual or group tasks / learning based on practical activities.

Various forms of assessment are used in halls of residence to evaluate students' improvements. The majority of colleges assess students' skills at the beginning and at the end of the training course but sometimes, assessment models are not structured. Occasionally, only an evaluation form (measuring students' satisfaction of the courses) is provided. Very rarely assessment is 'formal' and quantitative, through written or oral tests. This kind of assessment is normally used for academic courses. Generally, assessment of soft skill courses is based on teachers' or tutors' observations of individuals working in groups or on their own. This observation can be unstructured and based on teachers' or tutors' free descriptions; sometimes an assessment grid or a checklist can be provided. Another tool is self-assessment, which is probably the most popular method in halls of residence to evaluate students also during courses; nonetheless, also in this case there is a lack of structured tools.

Self-assessment and interviews are widely used to examine students entering in colleges; only some Italian residences have adopted assessment

centres. Assessing students’ capabilities is a fundamental step to define their training paths, focusing on the areas to improve and determining the selection of courses to attend; ignoring this phase will strongly influence learning and personal education goals. Assessment at the end of the process (at the end of a course, of a year or of a whole period in the hall of residence) is important to verify the fulfilment level of the set goals. At the same time, it is also true that accurately summarizing learning — especially the breadth and depth of learning that occurs across different years in collegiate halls of residence — in a few simple quantitative parameters is a difficult task. Not only do tests of this type tend to measure merely factual knowledge (as compared to understanding, reasoning, or creative ability), but they do so in a manner that isn’t enough meaningful for the student. As a matter of fact, halls of residence are shifting the focus of assessment from quantitative to qualitative assessment but the problem is that very often this kind of assessment is not systematic or structured.

Some halls of residence in Italy are providing a university coaching services for their students. With the help of a coach, each student is required to set personal goals for continuous improvement. Through this process the student is able to explore his/her own areas of development, set SMART (i.e. Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Time-bound) goals as well as identifying the best tools to achieve these goals. At regular intervals students — together with their coaches — monitor their progress through assessments. At the end of the individual coaching process, the coach could issue a coaching report, which is composed of the following parts: analytical description of the skills that the coachee (student) has chosen to develop; analytical description of set goals and intended outcomes; synthetic assessment of the results, comparing the initial and the final self-assessment of soft skills mapping.

V.2. Methodologies for soft skills development

Learning methodologies continue to be shaped and impacted by changing societal and trends, taking also into account the new possibilities offered by technology. One way to understand this impact on the development of soft skills is by outlining a map of the most appropriate methodologies in use.

Soft skills are developed through formal and informal activities as mentioned previously, and universities recognise formal skill development activities in the classroom and outside the classroom. The informal skill development activities are non-academic and while not officially recognized

in terms of bearing credit for participation, the structure of the courses and training programs can be similar to those offered for credit. Soft skills development in the classroom can be performed using mini-curricula, programs, workshops, labs, training sessions, projects, company visits and study journey, and individual or group tasks. Similarly, these same or similar activities can take place in the co-curriculum to compliment the skills obtained in the classroom.

With the qualitative research on the best practices applied to soft skills,⁷³ different kinds of teaching strategies were identified in the ModEs project. They can be divided into three groups: expository, guided, and active strategies (see Table 4). The strategies include both university teaching methods and company training techniques.

Table 4
Learning Methodologies to Develop Soft Skills

Expository	Guided	Active
Lecture	Discussion, debate	Brainstorming
Seminar	Workshop	Role play
Conference	Case study	Business game
Demonstration	Project work	Visits, Journeys
	Simulation	Outdoor training
	Mentoring	Coaching

A further challenge is represented by the use of digital technologies for the training of the soft skills. In the ModEs project a prototype of “serious game” was implemented in order to train communication, negotiation and team work. The approach taken to develop the serious game included three different pedagogic concepts — i.e. exploratory, experiential, and game-based learning — which reflect the paucity of existing research linking pedagogic elements to both learning requirements and technical features. In the eLene4work project students learn how to fill their soft skill gaps using MOOCs (Massive online courses) and OER (Open Educational Resources).

⁷³ Maria Cinque, *Soft Skills in Action. Halls of Residence as Centres for Life and Learning* (Brussels: EucA, 2012). Maria Cinque, *Soft Skills in Action. Halls of Residence as Centres for Life and Learning*. Second Revised Edition (Brussels: EucA, 2014).

The aim is to provide a proof of concept and introduce innovative ways of soft skills training.

Halls of residence promote different kinds of teaching methods and educational settings that can produce different kinds of learning,⁷⁴ which are described here:

- *Cooperative Learning*: students work in small groups on an assigned project or problem, under the guidance of the facilitator who monitors the groups.
- *Problem-based/Project-based learning*: participants work in small groups to solve a problem and are guided by a tutor-facilitator.
- *Action Learning*: it is a process that facilitates and enhances the learning of groups of people coming together to tackle real challenges and at the same time learning from experience through reflection and action.
- *Experiential learning*: it is the process of grasping meaning from the experience itself. The student must be able to reflect on the experience, must possess and use analytical skills to conceptualize the experience.
- *Reciprocal learning*: two students form a learning partnership committed to helping each other reach a particular learning goal.
- *Progressive mastery*: it is characterized by sequential micro-reinforcement in units of learning about a subject or training aimed at developing a competence.
- *Critical reflection*: students are required to carry out specific tasks that enhance their reflection and their metacognition about the activities performed.
- *Active seeking of meaning*: it consists in helping student to actively seek the personal and social meaning of whatever they are doing, of their activities and experiences, in order to overcome difficulties that arise during study.

It is important to bring students together in a collaborative/competitive environment and they can learn from each other and through the exposure to authentic, complex and real-life problems. Soft skill learning is ‘meaningful,’ since it is a wilful, intentional, active, conscious, constructive,

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*.

and socially mediated practice that includes reciprocal intention — action — reflection activities.

VI. Conclusions

Pushed by current socio-economic projections, a rising number of governments and international institutions are trying to bring closer the world of education and training and the world of work: graduates’ employability, innovation and entrepreneurship, ICT use in tertiary education, are just some of the topics on this agenda. The level of youth unemployment across the world is one factor in the increasing pressure on universities to tailor their curricula on current labour market needs as well as anticipating competencies for future jobs. From gathering evidence on skills demand, experimentation with curricula design, research on the training and assessment of soft skills in academia, to university-business cooperation, universities can provide an important contribution both with research initiatives for evidence-based policies and actively working toward the development of national and international skills strategies.

Soft skills, as discussed earlier, might be listed among the expected outcomes of the university curriculum. From 1999 to 2010, the Bologna Process members aimed at creating the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which was officially created with the Budapest-Vienna Declaration of March, 2010.

Since 2001, Dublin Descriptors have been adopted as the cycle descriptors for the framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. They offer generic statements of typical expectations of achievements and abilities associated with awards that represent the end of each Bologna cycle: knowledge and understanding, applying knowledge and understanding, and the ‘soft’ skills; making judgements, communication skills, learning skills. The Member States have gradually integrated the descriptors within their Higher Education systems. In Italy, for example, in 2010, the Ministry of Education published the Qualifications Framework for Higher Education, which summarises the main features of the Italian Higher Education Degree System, describing each course in terms of credits and general learning outcomes. In spite of this general trend, the focus of the programmes offered at most EU universities is still based on teaching traditional scientific skills rather than on soft and complementary skills.

The decade 2010-2020 has been aimed at consolidating the EHEA, so that universities may become motors of change and innovation. One strategic action is the curricular reform to tailor higher education institutions to the requests coming from the labour market. Mismatches between skills and

jobs, such as skill gaps in the workplace, shortage of adequately skilled figures for certain positions or the abundance of candidates in sectors where there are not enough suitable vacancies need to be corrected. Effectively anticipating which skills will be required by companies in years to come is crucial in order to equip future workers with the ‘right’ competencies.

The aim of this article was to enhance understanding of soft skills and to indicate key areas for soft skill development at University level.

One difficulty is represented by the fact that different countries have different methodologies and approaches to the teaching and recognition of skills for employability. The presence of such discrepancies requires that cooperation should be strengthened among the different stakeholders to find common solutions and educational models that provide a common set of skills and of training tools.

Another obstacle is represented by the absence of a common language. This is why in the first part we discussed different definitions and classifications of soft skills in order to enhance the understanding of this theme.

One further issue is to identify the soft skills most required by the labour market. Different studies have investigated on this theme. We presented two examples, carried out during two European projects, of quantitative and qualitative researches.

The comparative analysis of the state of the art of soft skills development in different European countries presented in the fourth part of this article painted a very dis-homogenous picture: although the topic is widely debated in all the countries, in some of them (Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, UK) there are many initiatives going on, whilst in some others (Greece, Italy, Spain) the topic is still developing. Nevertheless, besides national and transnational initiatives (many European projects have been carried out on this theme), we mapped “best practices” coming from European halls of residence, where besides with learning methodologies and techniques, soft skills development is fostered through an opportune environment.

The importance of the “environmental factor” is also stressed in the recent Report published by the High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education:⁷⁵

Universities and higher education institutions, as part of the education system, should not educate students only in narrow, knowledge-based specializations, but must go further, seeking the integral education of the

⁷⁵ EC (European Commission), “Modernisation of Higher Education, Report on Improving the quality of teaching and learning in Europe’s higher education institutions,” 2013, 36, accessed March, 31, 2016, http://ec.europa.eu/education/library/reports/modernisation_en.pdf.

person. [...] Efforts need to be concentrated on developing transversal skills, or soft skills [...]. In order to develop these skills, teaching is not enough: an appropriate environment is also required. For example, extra-curricular activities, whether organized in a university/college/institute environment, ranging from volunteering, culture and the arts, to sports and leisure activities, help develop soft skills and nurture talents.

Future research should focus on the relationship between soft skill development and environmental conditions, not only at university but also in schools and on the job, also exploring the connection between these skills and what was already known as “hidden curriculum”, i.e. the unwritten, unofficial, and often unintended lessons, values, and perspectives that students learn, as a function of implicit values held by the institution as a whole. The hidden curriculum consists of the unspoken or implicit academic, social, and cultural messages that are communicated to students while they are in a specific environment (school, university, hall of residence etc.) and that are part of the organizational culture of that environment. Educators (school teachers, university professors, halls of residence directors etc.) need to be aware of the symbolic aspect of the environment and of their role in structuring students’ soft skills.

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“Lost in translation”. Soft skills development in European countries

Maria Cinque

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