



United Nations
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المركز الإقليمي للتخطيط التربوي
Regional Center for Educational Planning

POLICY BRIEF

Regional Center for Educational Planning

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Soft Skills in Education: The role of the curriculum, teachers, and assessments



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Disclaimer

This policy brief was commissioned by the UNESCO Regional Center for Educational Planning (RCEP) in Sharjah, as part of the operational initiatives of its second strategic goal. That is, to produce and disseminate knowledge in support of policymaking in education and education systems planning. The content of this policy brief has not been edited by the RCEP team. The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and should not be attributed to RCEP.

Summary

This policy brief is based on a paper that examines the definitions of soft skills, and research on how educational systems can support students to develop the most critical of them. With increased demand for and attention on soft skills in the workplace, there has been an increase in research on this broad topic, as well as increasing pressure on schools and universities to foster the development of soft skills from early childhood onward. This policy brief presents key elements of various definitions of soft skills and explores the “skills gap” the private sector has identified in how students are prepared in educational systems. It also explores the different approaches and methods that can be used to teach soft skills, including by integrating them into school curricula and supporting teachers to better impart them in their students. Policy recommendations related to soft skills and educational systems are also included.

Introduction

Research shows that individuals who possess both hard and soft skills are most successful in life and work (Majid et al., 2012; Shultz, 2008; Wats & Wats, 2009). However, exactly which skills are most critical to success is a matter of debate. There is also no consensus about how to most effectively incorporate soft skills into learning (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2010).

While some educational systems and schools have now integrated soft skills into their curricula, their development has traditionally been neglected (Schulz, 2008). In many European countries, soft skills are included only in university curricula, if at all (Haselberger et al., 2012; Cinque, 2016). Several scholars argue that training in soft skills at university is too late, and that soft skills need to be introduced early, in the first cycle of education or even in early childhood (e.g., Laureta, 2018; Heckman & Kautz, 2013). When introduced at an early stage, soft skills can continue being developed and strengthened as an individual grows because, as Heckman and Kautz (2013) argue, 'skills beget skills' (p.453).

There are various rationales as to why soft skills are important. Many researchers argue that schools should teach soft skills to support individuals' holistic development and strengthen their sense of citizenship (Nussbaum, 2010). According to Nobel Prize winner James Heckman: "soft skills predict one's success in life". He finds that a combination of high intellectual and emotional intelligence most accurately predicts success both in personal and professional lives. He conducted research comparing American high school and GED graduates to explore whether people with GEDs were more likely to have sub-par social skills than those with high school diplomas. He also assessed whether such traits were a factor in academic and career performance later in life (Heckman & Kautz, 2013).

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Research finds that educating students with a broad mix of skills, including soft skills, lays the foundation for future national prosperity, given the relationship between human capital and economic growth (Hanushek et al, 2015; Hanushek, Machin & Woessmann 2011).

Soft skills benefit individuals entering the labor force and are associated with higher wages. An Australian study found that soft-skills-intensive occupations are predicted to account for two-thirds of all jobs by 2030 (Deloitte, 2017). Another study by Balcar (2016) found that soft skills are as useful as hard skills in generating wage returns. While there is a significant gender gap in wage returns for hard skills, wage returns for soft skills appear to be more gender-neutral. For this reason, Balcar argues that soft skills should be a key focus of education systems.

Given widespread agreement on the value of soft skills, this brief seeks to better understand the myriad definitions of soft skills, and identify best practices for educational systems to teach them to students. The next section explores the various meanings and aspects of soft skills that are relevant from early childhood through adulthood. Then, the following section examines teaching and assessment methods related to soft skills. Next, challenges associated with incorporating soft skills in educational systems are explored. The conclusion offers recommendations related to designing and implementing soft skills development programs in the educational sector.

Defining soft skills

Many researchers define soft skills in different ways. For example, according to Lippman et al. (2015, p. 4), soft skills “refer to a broad set of skills, competencies, behaviors, attitudes, and personal qualities that enable people to effectively navigate their environment, work well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals”. In contrast, according to Yorke (2006, p. 26), soft skills are “a mix of dispositions, understandings, attributes and practices.”

International organizations commonly refer to soft skills in institutional frameworks and reports. Table 1 shows the range of language used to describe soft skills in international frameworks and reports, with some referring to them as “competencies” and others as “skills”. In most European countries, the preferred term is competence. While sometimes used as synonyms, the terms “skill” and “competence” can be differentiated. ESCO (2022) states that “skill” typically refers to the use of methods or instruments in a particular setting and in relation to defined tasks. On the other hand, the term “competence” is broader and refers typically to the ability of a person who is facing new situations and unforeseen challenges to use and apply knowledge and skills in an independent and self-directed way (ESCO, 2022).

Table 1

Frameworks by international organization that are related to soft skills

<i>Category</i>	<i>Institutions</i>
Generic competencies	Tuning Educational Structures (González & Wagenaar, 2008)
Key competencies	EC (2006; 2018), OECD (2003), UNESCO (2015a)
Life skills/Competencies	WHO (1993), UNICEF (2010), JRC LifeComp (Sala et al., 2020)
Transversal skills	UNESCO (2015b), ESCO (2019)
Transferable skills	EC (2011), (Balcar, 2011)
21st century skills	OECD (2009), Partnership for 21st Century Learning (2015), World Economic Forum (2015)
Soft skills for talent	Manpower Group, 2014
Skills for social progress	OECD (2015)
Social and emotional skills	OECD (2018)
Competences for democratic culture	Council of Europe (2018)

Rationales for including soft skills in curricula

Educational systems are responsible for equipping students with the tools they need to succeed in life as well-rounded individuals, including soft skills. As noted earlier, soft skills are more commonly included in higher education curricula than at the early childhood or K-12 level. Although the inclusion of soft skills at the higher education level is valuable, research shows that introducing them earlier would have greater impact (e.g., Heckman & Kautz, 2013; Laureta, 2018).

Heckman and Kautz (2013) found that investment in human capital development generally comes too late. They argue that it is not enough to retrain people who have lost their jobs, and that soft skills development should start in early childhood, especially for children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Similarly, the OECD (2015) argues that skills acquired in early childhood contribute to individual well-being and social progress. Early interventions in social and emotional skills can play an important role in increasing skills and reducing inequalities in education and the labor force (Heckman & Kautz, 2013, p.453).

There are various arguments as to why soft skills should be included in curricula. Economic, social, and humanity-related rationales have been examined at the global, national and personal levels by UNESCO (2015b), as shown in Table 2. Sometimes the drivers behind the integration of soft skills into education are a combination of these discourses and perspectives.

Table 2

International organization frameworks related to soft skills

	<i>Economic Discourse</i>	<i>Social Discourse</i>	<i>Humanity Discourse</i>
<i>Global perspective</i>	Competitiveness	Social progress	Global citizenship
<i>National perspective</i>	GDP* Growth	HDI** growth	National identity
<i>Personal perspective</i>	Employability	Community	'Holistic' formation

Source: Adapted from UNESCO, 2015b.

* GDP: Gross Domestic Product

** HDI: Human Development Index

Common challenges for the introduction of soft skills in curricula

Potential challenges are a key area to consider when incorporating soft skills into contemporary instruction. Five common challenges related to incorporating soft skills into educational systems are explored below.

1. There is a lack of consensus on how to define soft skills, and which soft skills should be included in education

Various institutions and academics label soft skills differently, and there is no single unifying term. While there is general agreement that soft skills are important, there is no clear consensus about which soft skills are the most essential or how to effectively incorporate them into curricula, teaching, assessments, and other areas of education. This may factor into why education frameworks tend to not support or integrate soft skills and associated attributes (Kechagias, 2011).

2. Soft skills must be adapted to the cultural context

It is important to ensure that soft skills are culturally appropriate and that the methods of incorporating them in education systems are not cut and paste in nature. There may be a broad or overarching understanding of the value of soft skills areas, such as verbal communication and critical thinking. However, the regional and cultural norms of an area or country impact which set of soft skills is most context appropriate. For example, teamwork in a Chinese context would look different than teamwork in a Mexican context.

3. There is no agreement on how to best incorporate soft skills into curricula and teaching

How soft skills are taught to students is crucial to consider as there are countless ways to incorporate them into learning, including with embedded and parallel approaches. For example, in some situations, content can be embedded in classes that complement the curriculum so students can gain the required soft skills through engagement or team-related activities. However, this will not work in every situation and learning needs to be tailored.

4. It is difficult to measure and assess soft skills

Assessments regularly do not happen or mismeasure soft skills (Heckman & Kautz, 2012). However, a critical element of soft skills integration into education is measuring what students are learning (Bresciani, Gardner & Hickmott, 2010). It is important to know if students have acquired the targeted soft skills. See section 3.3 for more on assessing soft skills.

5. Soft skills are especially challenging to support in online settings

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the use of online learning tools worldwide. Some argue new technologies and open educational resources (OERs) allow for a more interactive learning experience and are valuable instruments in placing the learner at the center of the teaching/learning process (Samaranayake, 2022). However, learning dynamics are different in person, and customized approaches are required to incorporate soft skills in online education

Despite these challenges, soft skills have gained increasing attention over the past two decades. Given their value and importance, they continue to require greater attention from education systems (Singh, 2018).

Conclusion and recommendations

Soft skills should be incorporated into education in a holistic way. This section offers general recommendations to support the incorporation of soft skills into educational systems, universities, and schools, including in relation to curricula, teaching, and assessments.

1. Define soft skills in national educational systems

Given the numerous different definitions of soft skills, national educational systems need to have a clear understanding of what soft skills are, and which are most important in their cultural context.

It must be clear how soft skills will be conveyed in a learning environment. Ministries of education, schools, and universities need to have a shared understanding and clear definitions of soft skills to give them the focus and resources required.

2. Ensure soft skills are targeted in curricula and teacher trainings

A deliberate effort to include soft skills in curricula and teacher training is recommended. This can include sharing innovative approaches for teaching soft skills, cultivating local ownership, and leveraging local champions to advocate for the inclusion of soft skills in curriculum reform. A review of policies, strategies and initiatives aimed at promoting innovative approaches to incorporating soft skills can assist with this process. Interactive pedagogies can provide youth with ample opportunities to engage their soft skills. Approaches should be adapted appropriately for online and in-person learning. Creating a soft skills framework may support these efforts.

3. Incorporate internships and apprenticeships into education models

Internships and job apprenticeships can help students develop soft skills relevant for entering the world of work and life more generally. Public and private entities could be approached by education systems to support these partnerships.

The combination of learning and working is particularly beneficial for interns and apprentices entering the labor market. Internships and job apprenticeships are often formal requirements (particularly in VET, Vocational Education and Training) and apprentices acquire occupation-specific learning outcomes (including both theoretical and practical knowledge), plus transversal skills applicable across a range of occupations. Besides VET education, internships are required in many other fields, such as medical education and teacher training.

4. Plan for assessing soft skills and incorporate measurement instruments appropriately

There is no single model for how to best assess life skills within education.

However, designing a measurement methodology before implementing curricula can help ensure that the most appropriate method for assessing the targeted soft skill will be used. This allows for tool design to measure specific outcomes, for example, rubrics to measure oral communication (Bresciani, Zelna, & Anderson, 2004).

5. Create safe spaces, build community relationships, and expand social networks to promote soft skills

Ministries of education can partner with the private sector, community initiatives, and others to better understand which soft skills are required in the labor market and community. Based on the outcomes of this exercise, specific initiatives can be created to foster these skills in students.

In the long term, soft skills are invaluable to individual development and future employment, as well as to national economies. Policymakers, researchers, and educators are increasingly recognizing that current education models are failing to meet the needs of society and the workforce. Incorporating soft skills into education models in a holistic manner can begin to address these shortcomings.

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