

LEADING STUDENTS TOWARD A NEW SOFT-SKILLS PERSPECTIVE: DEVELOPMENT FOR EMPLOYMENT

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ABSTRACT

Aim. Based on similar studies, this research work aims to investigate the perception of students and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) of learning about the importance of soft skills for their education and employment since these skills are increasingly sought-after by potential employers.

Methods. The Kendall Tau b test and Mann Whitney U test have been applied to show the relationship between soft skills and job preparedness for students. This study investigates a selection of 100 students from a private HEI (UBT College) and 100 students from a public HEI (University "Haxhi Zeka"), both in Kosovo. A total of 200 valid responses were collected from July to September 2020. Goldsmith inventory for 15 soft skills has been distributed as a questionnaire has been distributed to the students of these universities.

Results and conclusion. The research results indicate that in soft skills development of the UBT College students is significantly higher than the soft skills developed of the University "Haxhi Zeka" students. The findings also show that most of the students believe that their actual soft skills were at a less than the desired level.



Practical application. This research implicates the Higher Education Institutions to consider the soft skills as an important tool for enhancing graduates' employability. The results indicate the need to reconsider the curriculum by embedding soft skills on it. The students' perception on soft skills is a contribution not only for the universities considered in this research but also for all graduates in HEIs in Kosovo, since the curriculum does not change much among universities. According to Eurostat the unemployment youth rate in Kosovo is about 55.4% and for this reason the results will help the HEIs to rethink about their students' future employment opportunities.

Originality. This is the only study done in Kosovo about graduates' soft skills and employment and it provides information about a concerning problem in the country. This paper suggests initiatives to upgrade students' soft skills and to improve their perspective on their future employment.

Key words: soft skills, Kendall Tau-b Test, Mann Whitney test, employability, graduates

INTRODUCTION

According to many authors soft skills are considered to be intangible, non-technical, and personal attributes that help one in leadership, interacting, and negotiation (Lahope, Worang, & Gunawan, 2020). The acquisition of soft skills by students enables them to be better able to adapt to new work situations and to take initiative in presenting their ideas (Harvey, 2000).

The main issue we wish to address is how HEIs can help Kosovo students gain new insights into soft skills and lead to a new perspective for employment. The paper discusses the role of soft skills in a work environment in Kosovo and gives suggestions on how to improve the preparation of future workforce. The lack of required curricula including soft skills is the major gap of university programs hindering the students' opportunity to be employed and succeed in the future work place. The purpose of the research is to study students' perceptions of their soft skills level and to estimate universities are preparing the future employees adequately.

In today's competitive market, business owners seek employees equipped with strong soft skills. While considering the value of soft skills, both private and public universities in Kosovo, should strive to work on developing students' soft skills on preparing them for the job market. The declarations were based on different research reports done in Kosovo and the recognition of the importance of these reports. A survey of 587 workers in Kosovo highlighted the lack of soft skills such as writing, communication, working in teams and creative thinking. The results of the survey confirms what EU Progress Report (European Commission, 2019) states, and specifically that the progress of Kosovo on education quality is still weak and does not address the employability gaps of the country. According to Besnik Krasniqi (2019), the three most important general skills for employers in Kosovo's economy is teamwork, teaching and instruction skills, and arithmetic. Krasniqi (2019) recommends that any training curriculum and training programme should ensure that graduates have the necessary team work skills, writing, numeracy,

manual dexterity and other general skills. In the research of Krasniqi (2019) the majority of companies surveyed consider the elevated importance of the aforementioned skills.

One of the measures to create and develop the entrepreneurial mind-set, considering the growing value of soft skills, is the need for these skills to be reflected in curricula (European Training Foundation, 2014). This report says that "the challenge is to ensure that the education and training system does not lead to a workforce with inadequate competencies and qualifications, and obsolete knowledge and skills as a result of insufficient emphasis on practical instruction and latest technological developments in curricula" (European Training Foundation, 2014, p. 31). The labour market in Kosovo has high demand for employees who have high skills, and developing the future employees' soft skills will reduce unemployment rates in Kosovo. The youth unemployment rate is 57.7%. The development of soft employability skills will make it easier for the youth to find jobs, which will reduce the unemployment rate in Kosovo. HEIs play an important role in unemployment reduction, and the skills needed for students' future employment should be part of the curriculum and training (Singh & Jaykumar, 2019). The failure to include such skills in the curricula has far reaching implication in terms of negative business outcomes in this highly competitive global work environment (Dean & East, 2019).

Most studies are focused on the perspective of the employers and a limited number of studies are documented which focus on students' soft skills and positions perception or on the role of universities to prepare a skilled workforce. Even though this research deals with the role of universities in preparing students for labour market, researches reveal that soft skills must be taught since the primary school, or even earlier within the family (Duffy, Gordon, Whelan, Cole-Kelly, & Frankel, 2004).

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study are to understand the awareness and significance of soft skills among students and to suggest measures to increase the effectiveness of soft skills development courses or programs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Undergraduates' necessity for soft skills

Students' perception of the importance of soft skills for future employment in Kosovo is the goal of the research and for this reason we have conducted an extensive literature review of soft skills defined by other researchers. The necessity for skilled employees is emphasized in many studies. Soft skills like communication skills, leadership quality, presentation skills, team work, positive attitude, etc., are also very important for someone who will be entering into a highly technical world (Srivastava & Kuri, 2020).

James J. Heckman and Tim D. Kautz (2012) emphasize the fact that trainees' soft skills predict their success in life, so it is important to invest in interventions to enhance soft skills. The work force and those graduating high school and colleges may not realize that there are other competencies that are equally important, such as soft skills. This is one of the main causes of the low employment among graduates (Nusrat & Naz, 2018). Finally, studies shows that soft skills are relevant for a successful career when compared to technical skills (Clarke, 2016). Researchers suggest that collaboration of industry with HEIs will help improve the soft skills acquisition among their graduates (Ahmad, 2013).

Weili Teng et al., (2019) researched the students' perspectives and found that students who possessed soft employability skills were more likely to be employable. Related to this, the study of Jane Andrews and Helen Higson (2008) shows that there is a strong correlation between soft skills and work performance, and that universities play a key role in training future employees because they can assist graduates in developing business skills in the workplace.

Soft skills inventory studies

There is evidence showing that interpersonal skills are important for job interviews (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Ariana, 2010; Finch, Hamilton, Baldwin, & Zehner, 2013). Studies have been done to determine which skills are valuable and important for graduates. For example, Teng et al., (2019) conducted a study to analyse the employability of Chinese and Malaysian students. Apparently, the mental strengths developed by both Chinese and Malaysian universities are significantly associated with the willingness of their students to work. (Chamorro-Premuzic, Arteche, Bremner, Greven, & Furnham, 2010) are involved in another project. They used Goldsmith soft skills inventory in their research and the results show that soft skills are important for future employment of undergraduate students in UK universities. Hence, universities play a crucial role in preparing future employees and they should develop courses that enable students to gain skills needed for employment (Andrews & Higson, 2008).

Debbie Beard et al., (2008) examined the motivation of employers to utilize employment agencies to look for prospective employees. Joanna Poon (2012) in his research suggests that HR managers place a great deal of attention on soft skills. Real estate agents require the following characteristics: communication and presentation skills, professionalism and customer service skills. Most important skills taken into account in the interview include communication, honesty and integrity, collaboration, ethics, analytics, flexibility and adaptability, interpersonal skills, motivation and initiative, computer skills and leadership. Also the study of Kyriaki Matsouka and Dimitrios M. Mihail, (2016) states that companies are in search of certain particular soft skills, such as emotional intelligence, learning orientation, teamwork and flexibility. Employability is strongly linked to being a good manager, having skills related to teamwork,

and having good communication and inter-personal skills (Ahmad, Mohd, & Noorul, 2019).

HYPOTHESES

H1: There is a significant difference between UBT private College and “Haxhi Zeka” public university students in the development of soft skills;

H2: Student’s preparations for employment and soft skills have a statistically significant relationship.

Our research is based on previous studies (Anthony & Garner, 2016; Chamorro-Premuzic, Artech, Bremmer, Greven, & Furnham, 2010; Patacsil & Tablartin, 2017; Robles, 2012; Teng et al., 2019). Other studies addressing the problems of employability and the needs for soft skilled employees in Kosovo have also been taken into consideration in this study (European Training Foundation, 2014; Krasniqi, 2019; UN, 2016). This research will provide awareness among the universities in Kosovo on the crucial role of soft skills for undergraduates’ future employment.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH METHODS

The focus of this research is on leading students towards a new perspective on the soft skills development for employment. The questionnaire on the Goldsmith soft competencies inventory used for the purpose of this research was used by Teng et al., (2019). The main source of this research is the use of the questionnaire and a reliability test to demonstrate how reliable and appropriate data is collected. Also, we measured the relevance of questions using Cronbach’s Alpha, which shows high internal consistency, and therefore good research tools.

The skills of personal management and teamwork are formally studied in the research: including self-management, communication skills, teamwork skills, leadership skills, imagination skills, critical thinking, plans, and time management. Kendall B was used to test how well students are able to control their behaviour in the workplace. First, it was observed that the data collected were categorical and could not get distributed as a normal random variable. Second, it was shown that the correlation between X and Y is approximately equal to Kendall’s Tau B test if the non-parametric test does not follow the normal distribution and so the test statistics is Kendall’s Tau B (Kandell, 1938).

Furthermore, non-parametric test called Mann Whitney greatly examines the difference in students’ knowledge of the “soft skills” learned at universities by testing the mean rank and the significance of the differences from both sum rank and median rank. In order to observe the development of soft skills among the third level students or the master students from both universities, a factor analysis was also applied to the principle of component analysis. Mean-

while, a descriptive analysis was performed to describe the mean responses of the university students to the research questions and to show the variability of the university students' responses to the research questions using standard deviation being a good measure of variability.

RATIONALE FOR UTILIZING FACTOR ANALYSIS

Firstly, when there are many variables, factor analysis is a very suitable variable reduction technique. There should also be a linear correlation between the variables considered for the factor analysis, and the correlation matrix or correlation coefficient can confirm this. The measure of sampling adequacy, i.e. 0.6 and above should be reasonable. The data can be either continuous (interval or ratio scale) or ordinal (categorical), but the factor analysis is usually used for ordinal data in practice. Another important justification for using factor analysis is that among the variables of interest, there should not be any significant outliers. The above justifications are equivalent to the underlying assumptions for the selection of the above statistical tools used for this study: all the assumptions are met as their breaches may lead to misleading results. For the purpose of data analysis, SPSS version 26.0 was used, and then the analysis deduced the meaning inference.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The questionnaire was the research tool used to collect data from third-level and master students at UBT and "Haxhi Zeka" University both in Kosovo, and the total number of questionnaires completed by the students was 200, representing 100 from UBT College and 100 from "Haxhi Zeka" University, based on the two universities' development of their individual soft skills. In addition, the analysis of the collected data was undertaken and interpreted accordingly.

The reliability test for the entire data set, for this research, using Cronbach's Alpha, shows that Alpha is .971 and that among the 17 questions completed by students of UBT College and University "Haxhi Zeka," a high level of internal consistency is indicated. This implies that the research instrument (questionnaire) is good and well designed, such as the questionnaire. This further supports the fact that the statements are consistent and reliable in terms of scoring or coding. The alpha value of the Cronbach also tells us, in general, that all the questions are very relevant to the study.

Table 1

Comparing difference between UBT College and University "Haxhi Zeka" students in the development of soft skills

Statement	Both UBT College and University "Haxhi Zeka" N=200 Mean (SD)	Difference between UBT College and University "Haxhi Zeka" Z Value
My university prepares me for job markets	3.265 (0.899)	-8.785
My university developed my skills for employment	3.395 (0.896)	-9.119
My university has developed my self-management skills	3.410 (0.914)	-9.478
My university has developed my communication skills	3.405 (0.998)	-9.728
My university has developed my team working skills	3.490 (0.956)	-9.300
My university has developed my interpersonal skills	3.390 (0.901)	-8.194
My university has developed my ability to work under pressure	3.250 (0.955)	-7.591
My university has developed my imagination	3.300 (0.977)	-8.605
My university has developed my critical thinking skills	3.310 (1.009)	-8.880
My university has developed my willingness to learn	3.465 (1.012)	-9.831
My university has developed my attention to details	3.395 (0.966)	-9.376
My university has developed my planning skills	3.335 (0.984)	-9.691
My university has developed my ability to take responsibility	3.390 (1.001)	-9.303
My university has developed my insight	3.390 (0.949)	-9.046
My university has developed my professionalism	3.340 (0.948)	-9.272
My university has developed my level of maturity	3.265 (0.943)	-9.242
My university has developed my emotional intelligence	3.205 (0.909)	-7.800

Note: P<0.01 P<0.05 and P<0.01 significantly levels respectively.

Source: authors' calculation.

The above table presents the comparative analysis between UBT College and University "Haxhi Zeka" students in the increasing of soft skills and it shows that the statement "my university has developed my team working skills" has the highest mean value of 3.49 which implies that on average, the third year students (last study year) and master students responded higher to the ques-

tion while the statement “my university has developed my emotional intelligence” has the lowest mean value of 3.205 and that implies that on average, the question has the least response from the third year and master students. Also, the statement “my university has developed my willingness to learn” has the highest standard deviation value of 1.012 which implies the students of the two university shows a higher variability in their response to the question while the statement “my university developed my skills for employment” has the lowest standard deviation value of 0.896 which indicate the lowest variability.

Besides the Mann Whitney U test applied shows that UBT College has more developed skills than University “Haxhi Zeka” due to higher mean rank of UBT College than “Haxhi Zeka.” More so, the test of significance using the same Mann Whitney U test shows that p-values for each of the 17 statements is less than 0.01, 0.05 and 0.10 significant level which implies that UBT College is significantly higher than University “Haxhi Zeka” in soft skills development. The Z-value is the test statistic and it is being explained by the p-values as discussed above.

Table 2

Relationship between soft skills and student’s preparation for employment

Soft skills	Job Preparation
Development for employment	0.710
Self-management	0.567
Communication	0.595
Team working	0.579
Interpersonal	0.616
Working under pressure	0.536
Imagination	0.521
Critical thinking	0.529
Willingness to learn	0.603
Attention to details	0.550
Planning	0.574
Responsibility	0.556
Insight	0.625
Professionalism	0.578
Maturity	0.536
Emotional Intelligence	0.492

Note: P<0.01 P<0.05 and P<0.01 significant levels respectively.

Source: authors’ calculation.

The correlation coefficient, as seen in the above table using Kendall Tau B shows a strong positive correlation between the job preparation of the students and soft skills as the coefficient of correlation is greater than 0.5 with the exception of 0.492 emotional intelligence skills and that is also a positive correlation. The implication of this is that the more skills developed by third-year and master students, the better their readiness and preparation

for employment opportunities, and vice versa, because direct proportionality implies a positive correlation. In addition, the p-value for job preparation is less than 0.01 and each of the soft skills implies that there is a significant relationship between soft skills and the preparation of students for employment.

Table 3
Universities graduate's soft skill development

Total variance explained						
Component	Initial Eigen values			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %
Job market preparation	11.698	68.811	68.811	11.698	68.811	68.811
Development	.731	4.298	73.109			
Self-management	.630	3.706	76.814			
Communication	.565	3.326	80.141			
Team-working	.461	2.710	82.851			
Interpersonal	.423	2.486	85.337			
Working under pressure	.376	2.214	87.551			
Imagination	.335	1.973	89.524			
Critical thinking	.290	1.708	91.232			
Willingness to learn	.274	1.609	92.841			
Attention to details	.220	1.293	94.134			
Planning	.212	1.250	95.384			
Responsibility	.207	1.218	96.602			
Insight	.167	.984	97.586			
Professionalism	.162	.956	98.541			
Maturity	.142	.834	99.376			
Emotional intelligence	.106	.624	100.000			

Extraction Method: Principal Component analysis

Source: own research.

PCA is beneficial because it helps in filtering the large volume of numbers into a smaller space. Selection of components with values greater than 1 is one criterion. Under the total variance explained above, we have the first component (job market preparation) that has its own value greater than 1. This can also be confirmed by the screen plot, which graphs its own value (total variance explained) by the component number. Please note that the values themselves represent the total amount of variance that can be explained by a given main component.

Beginning with the first component, each subsequent component is obtained from the partial outflow of the previous component. The first component, therefore, explains the greatest variance and the last component explains the least. Looking at the table explaining the total variance, you will get the

total variance explained by each component. Component 1 is 11.698, representing 68.811% of the total variance. Since we extracted the same number of components as the number of items, the above initial Eigen value column is the same as the squared loading column extraction sums (Garson, 2009).

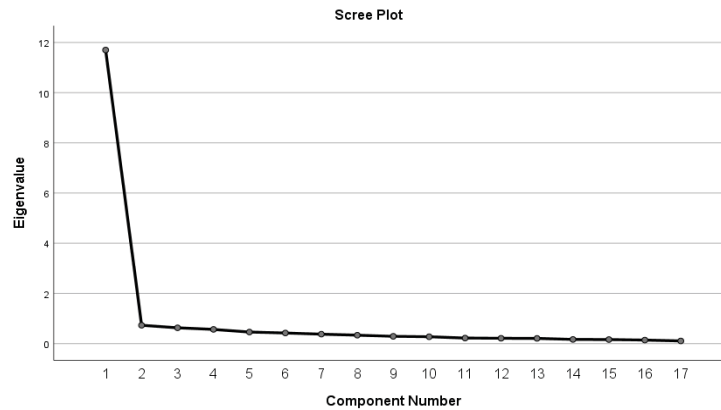


Fig. 1. Scree plot

Source: own research.

From the scree plot we can see that the component 1 has the highest Eigen value with sharp rise and drops off dramatically to component 2 down to component 17. This also support that fact that component 1 has the highest Eigen value with most variance.

The above table shows the communalities which represent the proportion of each variable's variance that can be explained by the factors. It is noted as h^2 and can be refer to as the sum of squared factor loadings for the variables. Component 2 (my university developed my skills for employment) has the highest proportion of variance while component 7 (my university has developed my ability to work under pressure) has the lowest proportion of variance. However, communalities with less than 0.5 are less representing but we don't have such case here.

It is important to note that KMO and Bartlett's Test is a diagnostic measure that supports the need of applying factor analysis. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure (KMO) of Sampling Adequacy varies between 0 and 1 and values closer to 1 are better, and from the above the KMO is 0.957 which shows a good sampling adequacy and this satisfies the assumption of using factor analysis and that makes factor analysis suitable for the data of this research work. The Bartlett's Test of Sphericity has p-value less than 0.05 significant level which implies that correlation matrix is significant meaning that the correlation matrix is not an identity matrix which implies that variables are correlated.

Table 4
Communalities

	Communalities Extraction
My university prepares me for job market	.635
My university developed my skills employment	.741
My university developed my self- management skills	.642
My university developed my communication skills	.722
My university developed my working skills	.708
My university developed my interpersonal skills	.655
My university developed my ability to work under pressure	.544
My university developed my imagination	.622
My university developed my critical thinking skills	.655
My university developed my willingness to learn	.736
My university developed my attention to details	.740
My university developed my planning skills	.722
My university developed my ability to take responsibility	.736
My university developed my insight	.722
My university developed my professionalism	.737
My university developed my level of maturity	.693
My university developed my emotional intelligence	.656

Source: own research.

Table 5
KMO and Bartlett's Test

KMO and Bartlett's Test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.957
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	3381.402
	df	136
	Sig.	.000

Source: own research.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the students' perceptions of the importance of soft skills for future employment in Kosovo. The results show that there is a strong positive correlation between the student's job preparation and soft skills: the correlation coefficient is greater than 0.5, except for 0.492 emotional intelligence, which is also a positive correlation. This means that, the more skills third-year and master students in Kosovo develop, the better they are prepared for job opportunities.

However, many students felt that their actual soft skills were at less than the desired levels. Students were also found to have the least emotional intel-

ligence skills, and this is probably why they did not endeavour to improve these skills at the two universities considered for this study. Furthermore, the application of the Mann Whitney U Test reveals that UBT College students develop much better their soft skills rather than the students in the University "Haxhi Zeka."

The need to increase the development of soft skills between students in order to prepare them for the workforce is thus necessary. It is essential to integrate soft skills training in suitable courses or programmes, based on the analysis of student's answers. This strategy was probably preferred because it could allow students to understand how to use these skills in particular situations. They can also feel overburdened by theoretical courses, making them less likely to participate in specialized programs to develop their universities' soft skills. To help students develop their soft skills, however, specialized training workshops should also be conducted. It is equally important that students make efforts to improve their skill levels by providing self-oriented readings and participating in appropriate training programs and activities.

It is obvious that there is a lack of communication between higher institutions of learning and industry (Ahmad Syed, 2013), notably for public higher education institutions such as University "Haxhi Zeka." Public HEIs should try harder to cooperate with the industry in order to find the best educational solutions in preparing students for the job market. The industry should communicate their needs and the HEIs should improve their curricula in line with the needs of the industry. Therefore, the future studies are recommended to investigate the institutions/businesses who have hired graduates from the universities in Kosovo to see what the gaps of the graduates are, related to soft skills, and what are the measures that universities should undertake to address these gaps.

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