



## Selecting soft skills to be taught at university

By

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### Abstract

Since 2010 the demand on soft skills while hiring employees has been increasing. They are of critical importance for graduates' employability, job maintenance and promotion. The list of soft skills offered by different researchers is huge, some skills are given various names – all this is confusing for educators who want to integrate soft skills into their curricula and syllabi. Consequently, the research aimed to determine which of the skills required by Georgian and Greek employers are not sufficiently developed among recent graduates. An online employer questionnaire was applied. 91 employers from various fields of economy and parts of Georgia and 54 from Greece participated in the research. The conclusion was made that the following soft skills demanded by Georgian employers are simultaneously demanded and insufficiently developed among recent graduates: connecting existing knowledge to new knowledge, critical thinking, problem-solving, stress coping, discipline and organisation, and decision-making. Additionally, the Greek employers named effective leadership skills, while they did not select critical thinking as the most lacking ones. A recommendation was given to emphasise these soft skills while developing curricula and syllabi for Georgian and Greek universities.

**Keywords:** soft skills, university curricula, graduates' employment

### Introduction

According to Fantizzi et al. (2024), soft skills are the “skills manifested by individuals and not attributable to technical competencies” (p. 167). Compared to “hard skills” which deal with skills and knowledge directly connected with a profession, “soft skills” include competences needed in any sphere of professional or even private life. The demand on soft skills by employers has rapidly increased since 2010, as it was revealed that they, besides hard skills, are important for success in getting and maintaining employment and promoting one's career (Asefer & Abidin, 2021; Bedoya-Guerrero et al., 2024; Yong & Ling, 2023).

Various researchers provide numerous lists of soft skills which partially differ according to employment area. European Commission (n.d.), for instance, offers a list of 37 skills, grouped in three competences: social and civic competence, learning to learn, and sense of initiative and entrepreneurship. Succi (2019) mentions 22 soft skills that can enhance graduates' employability, while Robles (2012) names 517 skills, among which the top ten most often cited by employers are: “integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, social skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork, and work ethic” (p. 462).

In Georgia, the role of soft skills in graduates' employment has not been much investigated. Stülb and Dzhvarsheishvili (2023) found that Georgian graduates believe they meet the competence expectations of the Georgian job market. On the other hand, according to Geostat, the National Statistics Office of Georgia, in 2023 the employment rate of recent graduates was 54.8%, which is very low. However, it has been high enough in private higher educational institutions between 86 and 92% (Chakhaia & Bregvadze, 2018), where more modern approaches to teaching have been applied.

Amashukeli et al. (2022) conducted a quantitative study with 1202 graduates from Bachelor's studies in Georgia during 2008-2020. They state that the most demanded by Georgian employers soft skills are team work (88%), meeting deadlines (86%), applying knowledge in practice (85%), adapting to new environment (85%), independent work (79%), argumentative reasoning (77%) compared to hard skills (76%). This is valuable information for higher education administrators and academics, however, the employers' views were assessed indirectly, via graduates' assessments, besides, it is essential to know not only which skills are needed but also which skills are not sufficiently developed among higher education institutions' graduates.



Research on soft skills of in Greece is not sufficient, either, although, in connection with the economic crisis it was greatly needed. Asonitou and Hassal (2019) found a gap between the market needs and bachelor graduates' skills, especially critical thinking skills. According to Asonitou (2022), who focused on Greek higher education and accounting studies, the lack of collaboration between universities and professional organisations is a major obstacle to the efficient development of soft skills. At the same time, pressures from the European Union and the Bologna Agreement highlight the need for educational reforms that will enhance the integration of soft skills into university curricula (Asonitou, 2022).

Soft skills are tightly related to students' personality traits, as the latter often serve as the basis of the former development. The study by Gkatsa and Papageorgiou (2025), conducted with 301 Greek undergraduate students, revealed notable differences in personality traits such as agreeableness and conscientiousness, according to students' majors. These findings highlight the importance of educational interventions aimed at enhancing interpersonal and emotional skills to improve students' academic experience, psychological well-being, and career prospects.

The problem is that there is no pre-set list of soft skills to be developed in a particular setting (country, period), while the whole list is huge. This makes it difficult for educators to make choices which skills to concentrate on in the conditions of limited time resources.

Therefore, our goal was to find out which of the required from graduates by Georgian and Greek employers skills are not sufficiently developed among recent graduates. The knowledge of these skills would be applicable for higher education administrators and academics to plan the curricula and the syllabi in a way more beneficial for graduates than they are at the moment. Correspondingly, a survey was conducted among Georgian employers using a self-made questionnaire. Then the results of the most needed skills were co-weighed to the lacking skills, to find those that need the most attention at Georgian and Greek higher education institutions nowadays.

## Methods

The study was empirical, quantitative, applying an employer questionnaire. To make up the questionnaire, literature on soft skills was sought by applying the Google Scholar search machine and ERIC database. There are more than two million publications on soft skills, which proves that it is a 'hot' topic, so the most cited articles containing lists of soft skills not related to a particular field/speciality, published during the last four years were selected for analysis (Lepeley et al., 2021; Lyu & Liu, 2021; Marin-Zapata et al., 2022). Some seminal, but earlier published works were also analyzed: Cimatti (2016), European Commission (n.d.), Matteson et al. (2016), Mitstifer (2012), and World Health Organization (1996).

### Tool

The questionnaire was developed, based on the analysed literature. It included 6 groups of soft skills teachable at higher education institutions: knowledge acquisition, construction, integration, and application, cognitive skills, intrapersonal development, interpersonal competence, humanitarianism and civic engagement, and practical competences; totally 25 soft skills.

The questionnaire consisted of a preamble, four questions which concern the respondents' demographic data, two multiple choice items: assessing all skills that the respondents view as needed (Q#5) (in a 4-point Likert scale, from '1' least important to '4' most important) and lacking (Q#6) (also in a 4-point Likert scale). At the end there was an open-ended item, where the respondents could make some comment if they found it necessary.

### Sample

No exact data on the population (people who can be viewed as 'employers': rectors/directors, heads of departments, etc.) size or names in Georgia and Greece exists. Correspondently, simple random selection would be impossible. The sample selection approach applied was purposive (employers were invited to participate) and convenience (those employers who could be reached via social media). This is a non-probabilistic approach, so, to make the obtained data more trustworthy, stratified (various industries and spheres) and cluster (different parts of Georgia and Greece) approaches were added. Finally, 91 respondents from Georgia and 54 from Greece participated in the research.

**Table 1. Demographic data of the Georgian sample**

Company /institution type	Public service	Public edu. institutions	Private edu. institutions	Agriculture	Industry	Sales	NGOs	Mass-media	Others
	8.8%	16.5%	25.3%	1.1%	5.5%	9.9%	2.2%	2.2%	28.6%
Company size	Large:	42.9%	Medium:	30.8%	Small:	26.4%			
Position	Top management	45.1%	Middle management	54.9%					
Geography	Tbilisi (63.7%)	Batumi (18.7%)	Telavi (7.7%)	Kutaisi (5.5%)	Akhaltikhe (1.1%)	Ozurgeti (1.1%)	Rustavi (2.2%)		

8.8% came from public service (Ministries, Town Halls, etc.), 16.5% from public and 25.3% from private educational institutions (schools, colleges, universities), 1.1% from an agricultural company, 5.5% - from an industrial company, 9.9% from a sales company, and 33% from 'other' spheres, including IT, logistic, construction, financial, and touristic companies, NGOs (2.2%), and mass-media (2.2%). This spectrum represents the spheres of Georgian economy well enough. They came from various sizes of companies/organisations: large, with more than 200

employees (42.9%), medium, with 21-200 employees (30.8%), and small, with up to 20 employees (26.4%). This also represents the jobs spectrum in Georgia (we do not have giant enterprises). About half-to-half represent top (45.1%) and middle (54.9%) management, all participating in hiring employees. Geographically, most urban Georgia was represented: Tbilisi (the capital) (65.9%), Batumi (the capital of the Adjara autonomy) (18.7%), some regional towns: Telavi (7.7%), Kutaisi (5.5%), Akhaltsikhe (1.1%), and Ozurgeti (1.1%).

**Table 2. Demographic data of the Greek sample**

Company /institution type	Public service	Public edu. institutions	Private edu. institutions	Agricultur e	Industry	Sales	NGOs	Mass - media	Others
	22.3%	48.1%	3.7%	5.6%	3.7%	3.7%	1.9%	1.9%	9.1%
Company size	Large:	38.5%	Medium:	26.9%	Small:	34.6%			
Position	Top management	38.3%	Middle management	61.7%					
Geograph y	Athens (1.9%)	Ioannina (40.7%)	Arta (7.4%)	Preveza (3.7%)	Thessaloniki (1.9%)	Corfu (1.9%)	Agrinio (1.9%)	Others	

22.3% came from public service (Ministries, Town Halls, etc.), 48.1% from public and 3.7% from private educational institutions (schools, colleges, universities), 5.6% from agricultural companies, 3.7% - from an industrial company, 3.7% from sales companies, tourism (3.7%) and 5.4% from 'other' spheres, including energy, sports service, and a consulting company. They came from various sizes of companies/organisations: large (38.5%), medium (29.6%), and small (34.6%). More than a third (38.3%) represent top and the rest middle (61.7%) management, all participating in hiring employees. All these well enough represent Greek employers. Geographically, Athens (1.9%) were underrepresented, while there were many Greek cities presented: Aoannina (40.7%), Arta (7.4%), Preveza (3.7%), Thessaloniki, Corfu, Agrini, ... (all represented by 1.9%).

**Procedure**

The questionnaire was in Google Forms. The questionnaires were in Georgian and Greek (the native languages of the respondents), to make it understandable for more employers. The link was available on the authors' social media, as well as on academic and business sites (Academia, Research Gate, and LinkedIn) for two months, periodically renewed. Unfortunately, we had to start the experiment on the skills' development (which will be the topic of our future publications), and could not continue gathering more participants.

**Results & Analysis**

The obtained results are summed up in Tables 3 (for Georgia) and 4 (for Greece). The means for the most needed soft skills were calculated, as well as the means for the skills that graduates lack most, according to the employers' opinions. In

red colour are marked the most popular "needed skills" answers (the left column), and in blue colour – the highest rated "lacking skills" answers (the right column). Those skills were selected that were assessed by the employers as simultaneously highly-needed and highly lacking. They are marked in green colour.

Initially, we selected 10 highest-rated skills in each category, but the sum made up too many skills, that is why we left nine highest-rated skills in each category (for the experiment we chose the eight most rated skills in each category, which gave us a list of three).

**Table 3. Survey mean results for Georgia**

Soft skills	Most needed skills	Skills graduates lack most
Understanding knowledge from a range of disciplines	3.42	2.31
Connecting existing knowledge to new knowledge, ideas and experiences	3.70	2.36
Constructing knowledge	3.57	2.47
Relating knowledge to daily life	3.59	2.26
Critical thinking	3.86	2.34
Effective/logical reasoning	3.88	2.21
Creativity	3.38	2.20
Problem-solving	3.84	2.45

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Data analysis	3.58	2.40
Realistic self-appraisal and self-respect	3.57	2.32
Commitment to ethics and integrity	3.60	2.24
Stress coping, emotional self-control	3.64	2.55
Discipline and organisation	3.67	2.40
Collaboration and teamwork	3.62	2.25
Effective leadership	3.27	2.52
Empathy	3.46	2.19
Cultural sensitivity, understanding and appreciation of cultural and individual differences	3.50	2.11
Global perspective	3.30	2.46
Social responsibility	3.42	2.25
Decision-making	3.69	2.36
Pursuing goals	3.51	2.18
Communicating effectively (oral presentations, discussions, reports)	3.48	2.12
Technological competence/ability to work with software	3.39	1.86
Managing career/professional development	3.45	2.24
Assessment of activity/obtained results	3.26	2.31

All skills on the list were found needed by the Georgian respondent employers (all the means were above 3), none of the skills were totally absent (all means of lacking skills are below 3), however, their recently hired graduates lack to some degree all skills. It was pleasant to find out that the least lacking skills are technological ones (M=1.86), which means that the majority of the recent graduates in Georgia possess the ability to work with software on a satisfactory level.

We obtained six soft skills (most needed + least possessed) that would be first of all recommended to Georgian educators to be added to their curricula and syllabi: connecting existing knowledge to new knowledge, ideas and experiences, critical thinking, problem-solving, stress coping, discipline and organisation, and decision-making. However, for the further experiment, we selected only three of them, with the highest rating, to make the experiment doable.

Among the additional soft skills not mentioned (at least, in this formulation) in the questionnaire that the Georgian employers added were:

- analytical skills (ability of deep analysis)
- practical/pragmatic thinking

- readiness to receive feedback
- adaptation in a team

No final comments were made.

**Table 4. Survey mean results for Greece**

Soft skills	Most needed skills	Skills graduates lack most
Understanding knowledge from a range of disciplines	3.35	2.33
Connecting existing knowledge to new knowledge, ideas and experiences	3.54	2.25
Constructing knowledge	3.28	2.08
Relating knowledge to daily life	3.30	2.50
Critical thinking	3.78	2.22
Effective/logical reasoning	3.65	2.09
Creativity	3.39	2.07
Problem-solving	3.41	2.50
Data analysis	3.31	2.21
Realistic self-appraisal and self-respect	3.35	2.38
Commitment to ethics and integrity	3.61	1.96
Stress coping, emotional self-control	3.50	2.52
Discipline and organisation	3.50	2.47
Collaboration and teamwork	3.67	2.04
Effective leadership	3.43	2.56
Empathy	3.39	2.11
Cultural sensitivity, understanding and appreciation of cultural and individual differences	3.17	1.98
Global perspective	2.78	2.11
Social responsibility	3.20	2.06
Decision-making	3.59	2.37
Pursuing goals	3.31	2.10
Communicating effectively (oral presentations, discussions, reports)	3.43	2.00
Technological competence/ability to work with software	3.39	1.70
Managing career/professional development	3.13	2.17

Assessment of activity/obtained results	3.17	2.17
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All skills on the list were found needed by the Greek respondent employers (all the means except the item “global perspective” were above 3), none of the skills were totally absent (all means of lacking skills are below 3), however, their recently hired graduates lack to some degree all skills. It was pleasant to find out that the least lacking skills are technological ones (M=1.70), which means that the majority of the recent graduates in Greece possess the ability to work with software on a satisfactory level.

We obtained five soft skills (most needed + least possessed) that would be first of all recommended to Greek educators to be added to their curricula and syllabi: connecting existing knowledge to new knowledge, ideas and experiences, stress coping and emotional self-control, discipline and organisation, effective leadership, and decision-making. Interestingly, four of them coincide with the skills both most needed and lacking for Georgian students, which may imply that this is an international trend, however, to say for sure, a wider-scope research is needed.

Among the additional soft skills not mentioned (at least, in this formulation) in the questionnaire that the Greek employers added were:

- Dealing with individuals with specific and problematic behaviours
- Combination of leadership and effective management
- Possessing proactive strategies
- Adapting theoretical knowledge and integrating it into the work environment

The final comments to the questionnaire by the Greek employers ran:

- They are not ready to work in real working conditions, although their intelligence level is sufficient they have difficulty adapting to the working environment
- Graduates of Greek Universities receive a high level of studies, despite the objective difficulties within and outside the University. This view is supported by the fact that most are accepted for postgraduate and doctoral studies at the best foreign universities, without particular difficulty, and subsequently, in their professional careers, they work for important organisations or multinational companies, as is tradition.

### Discussion

The soft skills that should be first of all taught in Georgian higher education institutions are: connecting existing knowledge to new knowledge, ideas and experiences, critical thinking, problem-solving, stress coping, discipline and organisation, and decision-making. The soft skills that should be taught in Greek higher education institutions are: connecting existing knowledge to new knowledge, ideas and experiences, stress coping, discipline and organisation, effective leadership, and decision-making. These lists, however, may need modification after several years, as the job environments may change with time. And, of course, in various countries, the lists may vary.

Table 5 reveals how important the soft skills selected by us were among the recommended ones in some other studies.

**Table 5. Suggested by us soft skills named by other sources**

Soft skills/authors	Cimatti (2016)	European Committee (n.d.)	Lyu & Liu (2021)	WHO (1996)	Mitsifer (2012)	Matteson et al. (2016)	Amashukeli et al. (2021)	Asonitou & Hassall (2019).
connecting existing knowledge to new knowledge	?	?	-	?	x	x	x	-
critical thinking	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
problem-solving	x	x	x	x	-	x	x	x
stress coping	x	x	-	x	?	?	x	-
discipline and organisation	x	x	x	-	-	x	x	x
decision-making	x	x	x	x	-	x	x	-
effective leadership	x	-	?	x	x	x	-	-

skills								
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The question mark in the table means that some similar idea, differently formulated, is expressed in the source, e.g., “are open to changing your attitude through the development of new knowledge and skills” in European Commission (n.d.) to stand for “connecting existing knowledge to new knowledge”. In Cimatti (2016) and WHO (1996) it is, in fact, hidden within cognitive skills, being one of them. However, our respondents found it extremely needed. Effective leadership in Lyu & Liu (2021) is mentioned as “people management”.

The obtained results are in line with the existing research. As it is possible to see, all analyzed sources mention critical thinking. Problem-solving and decision-making are mentioned by the majority of the authors, while stress-coping, discipline and organisation, and connecting existing knowledge with new knowledge may be ‘hiding’ under different terms such as ‘cognitive skills’ and ‘social-emotional skills.’ None of the skills suggested by us were rejected. On the whole, the skills selected by Georgian employers are found important by researchers worldwide, however, the importance of some of them (such as stress coping/dealing with one’s emotions and discipline and organisation/punctuality) may be culturally specific.

The obtained results are also in line with research earlier conducted in Georgia, for example, Doghonadze & Zorani (2021) analyzed the development of communication, problem-solving, decision-making, computer, leadership, teamwork, critical and creative thinking, presentation, and reflection skills. Janova and Murvanidze (2019) mention the development of social, communication (verbal, non-verbal, written, online, phone), interpersonal (problem-solving, adaptability, positivity, collaboration, honesty, work ethic, ability to manage stress), and emotional (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness) skills. The obtained results are partially in line with such Greek studies as Asonitou and Hassal (2019).

The selected list does not mean that, based on specific features of the program and courses, different soft skills (and different number of soft skills) may not/should not be developed. But these skills require special attention, at least from Georgian educators.

**Ethical issues**

The questionnaire was anonymous, its results are publicised only in scientific works, so it cannot harm any respondent in any way. As it was applied online and anybody who saw it could be involved, it would be impossible to obtain their written or oral informed agreement. That is why the preamble to the questionnaire contained short information about the research and a statement: “If you find some questions not suitable for you, you can drop out of the research by not submitting the questionnaire. If you submit the questionnaire, it automatically means that you agree to take part in the research.”

**Limitations**

The limitations of the research are linked to the sample size (91+54 participants), the geographical factor (Georgia and Greece), and the method of sampling (non-probabilistic). However, due to the stratified and cluster approaches, the obtained results are quite trustworthy, as minimum, thought-provoking for Georgia and Greece.

**Conclusions**

It was revealed that, on the whole, the graduates of Georgian and Greek higher education institutions more or less possess the required on the job market soft skills. However, the following soft skills demanded by Georgian employers are not sufficiently developed among recent graduates:

- connecting existing knowledge to new knowledge
- critical thinking
- problem-solving
- stress coping
- discipline and organisation
- decision-making

Similarly, the following soft skills demanded by Georgian employers are not sufficiently developed among recent graduates:

- connecting existing knowledge to new knowledge, ideas and experiences,
- stress coping and emotional self-control,
- discipline and organisation,
- effective leadership,
- and decision-making.

**Recommendations**

Soft skills have to be taught at universities. This is the contemporary trend and is mostly done, however, it is important to find out which soft skills the graduates of each particular institution/program lack most, hold training with academic staff on the ways to integrate them in the curricula and syllabi, and emphasise their development. The way the researchers applied to define the most needed skills can be used.

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