‘BRIDGE THE SKILLS GAP IMPLEMENTATION ROADMAP’ (IO5)

Level UP

Setting the ground for a multi-level approach on developing soft skills in Higher Education

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D I S C L A I M E R

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Level UP

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PART A- OVERVIEW OF IO5

INTRODUCTION

The main objective of IO5 was to develop a roadmap to support the implementation of the multi-level support system step by step (fig.1). The development of the 'Closing the skills gap' roadmap includes three components/steps (Mendoza et al. 2019):

a) a background analysis (current state analysis): to evaluate the degree of organization's awareness and capacity related to transversal skills development. By carrying out this analysis, a HEI would be able to assess the extent to which it has integrated, implemented and applied policies, strategic plans and reforms on that topic.

b) a foreground analysis: to identify and profile all, relevant to the topic, stakeholders within and outside the HEI (stakeholder analysis) and assess their engagement. The foreground analysis focused on (Pouloudi et al., 2016; Gregory, et al. 2020) defining a) each stakeholder's values, perspectives and multiple roles, b) stakeholder relationships/ alliances and possible areas of conflict, and c) identifying additional stakeholders who could be involved (i.e. snowballing method).

c) Developing the 'Closing the skills gap' roadmap: to create a roadmap on how to integrate all separate components (e.g. introductory course, skills training programs, tools and more) and each stakeholder's meaningful perspectives and engagement in each stage into a unified and comprehensive system. A workshop/ 'co-creation lab' was set up in each partner country to give the opportunity to all relevant stakeholders to come together and co-design the roadmap for implementation.

Key questions for IO5

- How could we improve the training process on soft skills in the context of our University? (Describe/create a detailed system of educational material development - re-evaluation of the soft skills the program is targeting and of the specific approaches that will be employed e.g. CBT, group exercises, observational approaches, psycho-education, reflective exercises, role play etc. - evaluation and feedback for further improvement, taking into account all stakeholders as described below in the scheme)

- How could we expand the training process to all the students? (Ways to develop the training process from one classroom to the whole departments of our University).

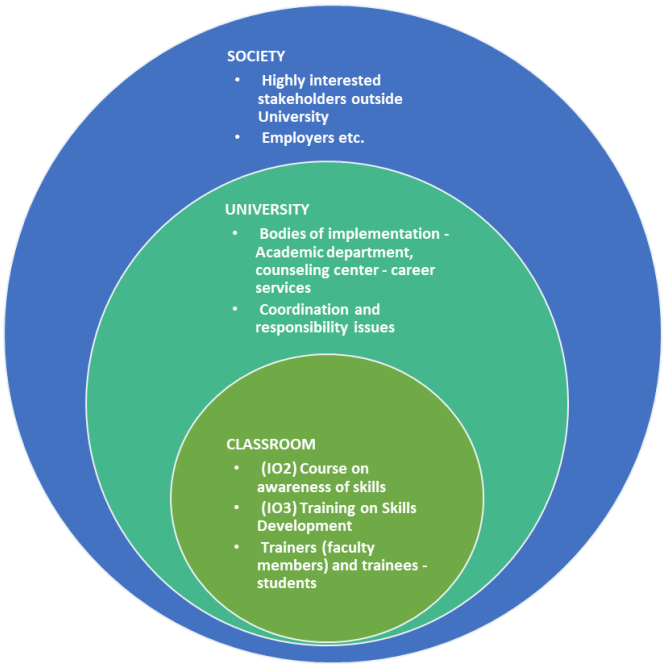


Figure 1

Critical points

- Challenge to think “out of the box”

- The outcomes of IO2 and IO3 (which focuses on the classroom), consider and extrapolate to the interrelated and connected systems that are involved in the implementation of the project for the promotion of soft skills on a multilevel approach.

Steps for implementing IO5 (fig. 2)

UCY - briefing paper, summarizing the issue IO5 needs to tackle, the existing research evidence (IO1), and the framework rationale as a proposed solution and its expected impact. It included the main outputs from IO1-IO3.

Meeting 5 – During this meeting the UoC provided guidelines how to conduct background analysis (to evaluate the degree of organization’s awareness and capacity related to transversal skills development. By carrying out this analysis, a HEI would be able to assess the extent to which it has integrated, implemented and applied policies, strategic plans and reforms on that topic)

By the end of March - Meeting 6 - UOC Team offered a short training to partners on how to conduct foreground analysis (to identify and profile all, relevant to the topic, stakeholders within and outside the HEI and assess their engagement).

By the beginning of May -Meeting 7 - UOC team provided a short training to partners on how to develop the roadmap during. This concerned the structure and agenda of the co-creation workshop which each HEI will host for the development of the roadmap.

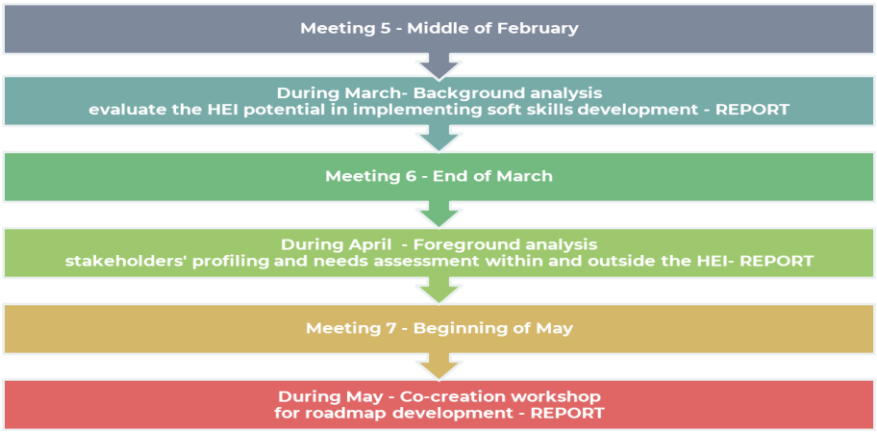


Figure 2

BACKGROUND ANALYSIS

Background analysis for each HEI involved the following (fig 3):

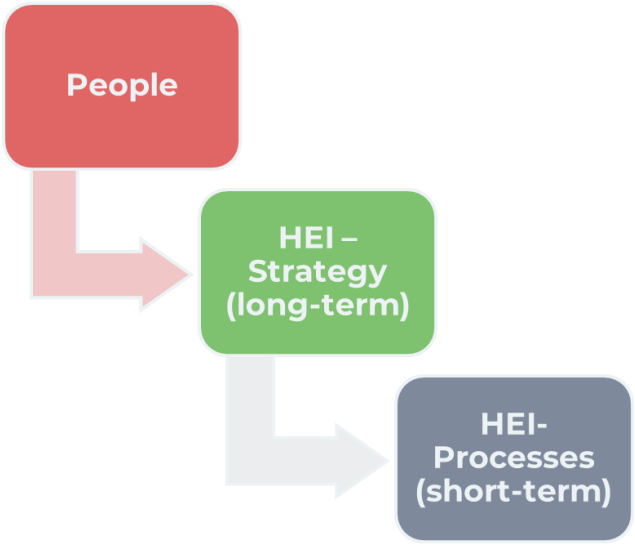


Figure 3

Regarding People it was crucial to spot who was at the top of the pyramid in HEIs

Each partner had to find out the top person/people on the pyramid and discuss following:

o Formal leaders – Informal leaders

o Departments that may deliver intervention (counseling center, department of internship, career office, academic departments etc.)

o Relationship of HEI with outside stakeholders – When, how, what process

o Educators – Who are possible educators (ask – maybe through email- people in charge of academic units, maybe through top person in HEI)

o Students – Do they have representatives etc.

HEI – Strategy (long-term) referred to vision, strategic plan, legislation and whether these elements are related or included soft skills development.

HEI- Processes (short-term) included HEIs' processes of education, any channels of education, the ways each HEI develops new content and how this content it is established and most importantly how it is related to skill development.

FOREGROUND ANALYSIS

o Foreground analysis was drawn from (fig.4):

1. outcomes from research conducted so far by partners

2. information from background analysis

3. systematic review as summarized in the Briefing Paper by UCY

o Key messages from these sources were as follows:

1. Universally important soft skills are interpersonal skills, communication skills, flexibility, stress management etc.

2. Some of these skills, such as communication, as seen as concrete and trainable. The personal ones such as stress-management cast doubt as to what is the best way to train.

3. A multi-leveled approach should be considered

o Foreground analysis aimed:

1. To consolidate the content, levels, and format of training for soft skills

2. To draw information from various stakeholders.

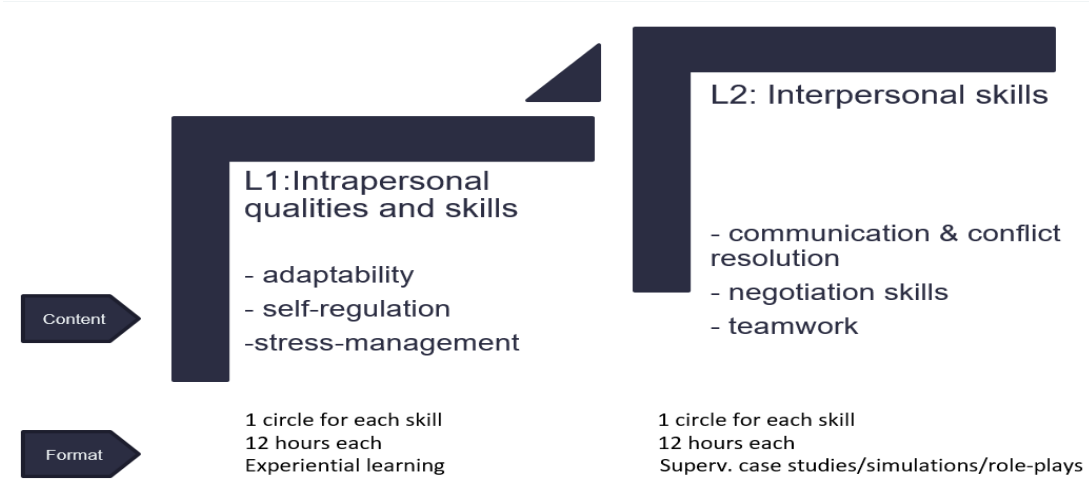


Figure 4

Purpose of focus groups and questionnaire

Both focus groups and questionnaire seek getting feedback on:

- the categories of soft skills the training should focus on (content),
- the proposed multi-level approach (and how the levels are linked to each other),
- and what would be the format of the training (whether taught modules, experiential-learning, or other).

Questionnaire expanded towards the stakeholders including the numbers and would incorporate few more questions on relevant topics.

Focus groups: Multi-level approach, content, and format

Focus groups:

Participants procedures and protocol for the focus groups

UoC proposed a mixed group of stakeholders following background analysis and previous experience on focus groups (6-7 people). Sampling should be purposive (critical cases) (Patton, 2002).

Regarding procedures and protocol we proposed two basic steps:

Step 1. Present to participants the soft skills categories and the selected multi-level approach so that they are clear about its rationale and logic.

Step 2. Engage participants to request feedback to consolidate specifics on content, level, and format.

Protocol

Please find below a protocol to run the IO5 – Bridge the skills gap implementation roadmap. The protocol is merely a guide and the aim of this protocol is to facilitate the implementation of the focus groups, and to reduce your workload associated with this. With the exception of the focus group questions, feel free to adjust to your liking.

Before focus group:

- Following ethics approval for the focus group create an informed consent form
- Set up a date and time for the focus group
- Contact people and institutions based on this protocol and invite potential participants
- Once people accept invitation send link to complete demographic information (link to be circulated)
- Focus group N

Aim for a final N=6-7 (invite more people to reach your aim

Focus group composition:

Aim for a heterogeneous group of stakeholders: e.g.

1. HE staff program director or representatives

2. HE staff with experience in teaching (soft) skills

3. Students with bootcamp experience

4. Employer or other stakeholders relevant to soft skills training

Please also review background analysis to decide who you could invite from categories (1) and (2) above.

- Select a moderator:

o Role of the moderator:

- Nurtures disclosure, openness and spontaneity
- Encourages discussion
- Keeps discussion on track
- Makes sure all topics are covered
- Remains neutral (e.g. by refraining from nodding/raising eyebrows, agreeing/disagreeing, or praising/denigrating any comment made)

o Recommended soft skills for the moderator role:

 Leadership

 Interpersonal skills

- Select an assistant moderator

o Role of the assistant moderator:

- Arrange recording
- Take notes (e.g. facial expressions or body language that stands out)

At time of focus group:

- Welcome participants & introduce yourself (moderator and assistant moderator)

Example:

Good morning/afternoon/evening and welcome! Thank you for taking the time to join us and to talk about the role of soft skills in employability and soft skills development in higher education.

I am [moderator] and assisting me is [assistant moderator].

I will be the moderator in today's discussion. The format we are using is a focus group. A focus group is a conversation that focuses on specific questions in a safe and confidential environment. I will guide the conversation by asking questions that each of you can respond to. If you wish, you can also respond to each other's comments, like you would in an ordinary conversation. It is my job to make sure that everyone gets to participate and that we stay on track. [Assistant moderator] will record and summarize your comments.

- Explain the purpose of the focus group

Example:

The purpose of this gathering is to get your thoughts and ideas about soft skills development in higher education. Soft skills are essential to do well in life, and in particular at the workplace. With the focus groups we seek to investigate the training format, the practices and means to address the need for soft skills development in HE most efficiently. We, therefore, look forward to your views as to what would work and what would not work in soft skills development for the imminent design of the relevant soft skills programmes.

- Complete the informed consent process

- Explain the ground rules & seek confirmation of all participants that they agree with these ground rules

Example:

1. We want you to do the talking. We want everyone to talk, but, of course, only one person at a time. It is important for us to hear everyone's ideas and opinions.

2. There are no right or wrong answers to questions. Every person's ideas and opinions are important and valuable. Please speak up whether you agree or disagree. We want to hear a wide range of opinions.

3. What is said here, stays here. It is important that you feel comfortable sharing when sensitive issues come up.

4. This session will be audio recorded to help us gather more detailed information than handwritten notes, and it will allow us to double check for accuracy.

5. Please stay with the discussion; turn off or silence your mobile phones, and close your email.

- Start recording

- Introduction round and icebreaking

 Ask participants to briefly introduce themselves and say something they consider important about them in relation to soft skills.

 Focus group questions:

Specific questions in light blue colour

Proposed time schedule

 Engagement questions:

o What, in your opinion, are some key formats for soft skills training courses?

 For example, could the format be independent lecture-based modules, experiential workshops, simulation exercises, role-playing etc.?

 What other methods could be used, potentially?

 Should soft skills training be embedded in existing courses and programs or be run in parallel to existing courses and programs

 Should soft skills training be rewarded by ECTS? Should it be by faculty with specific specialization on soft skills, as part of the core curriculum or on the side as seminars offered for example by the Counselling Centre (or similar)?

 How much time should be invested in soft skills development?

 Should employers contribute to the implementation of soft skills in HE, and if so, in what way?

 What sort of training should have those who will lead/run the soft skills training?

o Do you think the format should be differentiated based on a set of criteria:

 Different soft skills categories, for example?

(a) intrapersonal attributes and skills such as self-regulation, resilience, and/or stress management, and

(b) interpersonal skills such as communication and conflict resolution, teamwork, and/or negotiation skills

 In terms of study level (year 1 to year 4), how would you propose to organize soft skills training?

- How many modules, when (which years)?

- In terms of sectors and professions (and/or disciplines) for which we would design the training how would you differentiate (if at all) the format of the training and the overall design?

o How would you evaluate the efficacy of the training programmes designed?

- How could we assess soft skills? How could we assess if a person is adequately or expertly skilled in an area of soft skills?

- If, alternative programme formats have been proposed, please refer to them separately.

- Exploration questions:

o Questions about the implementation expectations and requirements:

- What is the more effective way to embed soft skills training in HE? Πώς

- Would it be meaningful to assign ECTS to soft skills education/training?

- Who would the trainer need to collaborate with to run the training programme and assess it?

- Who would supervise the assessment and how would this take place?

- What would be some key dimension that will be incorporated in the assessment (institutional, environmental etc).

· Discussion probing questions during the focus group if necessary:

o Did anyone else have a similar opinion?

o Does anyone else feel the same way?

o Did anyone else have a different thought?

o Can you talk about that more?

o Can you help me understand what you mean?

o Can you give an example?

· End of the focus group:

That concludes our focus group. Thank you so much for participating and sharing your thoughts and opinions with us!

· After the focus group:

Save recordings according to you data management protocol

Consent form (example)
You can use this to integrate in your institute's informed consent form.

Thank you for considering to participate in the focus group on soft skills development in higher education.

Although students in higher education commonly graduate with excellent technical academic skills to do well in their future profession, it is highly debated whether higher education graduates also have developed sufficient soft skills essential to do well at the work place.

The purpose of the focus group is twofold. First, we aim to gain a better understanding of which soft skills are most important to enhance employability, and thus require priority in higher education. Second, we aim to explore how these soft skills can be best implemented in the higher education curriculum.

Your participation in this focus group is voluntary. If at any time you feel uncomfortable with specific questions or with the situation that arises during the discussion, you are free to withdraw without giving any reason.

The focus group will be audio recorded. We will guarantee confidentiality of these audio recordings. After transcription of the audio recordings, the recordings will be deleted, and transcripts will be anonymous.

The results of this focus group can be used for scientific purposes and may be published, but dissemination of results will be fully anonymous.

The focus group will take about 90 minutes in total.

1. I understand what this focus group involves. □ Yes □ No

2. The focus group has been explained to me to my satisfaction. □ Yes □ No

3. I understand that, if I decide at any time during the focus group that I no longer wish to participate, I am allowed to withdraw from it immediately □ Yes □ No

4. I agree to participate. □ Yes □ No

5. I would be interested to get information about the next phases of the project, as well as

to participate in its actions. Receiving information on subsequent phases does NOT bind me

to participate in them. □ Yes □ No

I would be interested to get information about the next phases of the project, as well as

to participate in its actions. Receiving information on subsequent phases does NOT bind me to participate in them.

Please contact me using the following contact details (e.g. email address or telephone number)

.....

Appendix B: Date and time of focus groups

· Friday May 7th, at noon.

· Zoom meeting invitation to follow.

Questionnaire

Drawing from the focus groups the questionnaire explored participants' attitudes towards the multi-level approach, and the format of the soft skills training.

Moreover, the questionnaire explored the (a) motivation and student engagement approaches (e.g. ECTS credits, Compulsory modules) and (c) motivation and stakeholder engagement (such as employers, third sector etc) in training activities (e.g taught modules co-design, or potential to link soft skills training with apprenticeships, work placements etc). The questionnaire data were analysed collectively and used as an additional guide for the co-creation workshops. Descriptive results are presented in Appendix 1.

Questions Used:

1 - Completely Disagree 2 - Disagree 3 - Neither agree nor disagree 4- Agree 5- Completely Agree

Q1 Students in HE education should be trained in soft skills as part of all compulsory modules

Q2 Soft skills training should receive ECS credits to motivate students to participate.

Q3 Soft skills training in HE should be optional.

Q4 Soft skills should be taught separately for intrapersonal skills and qualities (emotional regulation, stress-management) and for interpersonal skills (communication, team-work)

Q5 Soft skills' training can take place in large lecture theatres.

Q6 Working in small group is the best way of developing soft skills.

Q7 Employers should co-design soft-skill training with academic partners

Q8 Employers should be consulted more in terms of designing academic modules

Q9 Intrapersonal soft skills, such as stress management and self-reflection, should be mainly taught in HE in specialist modules.

Q10 Interpersonal soft skills, such as communication and teamwork should be included as elements in most HE modules not just in specialist modules.

Q11 HE instructors in general, should be trained and guided on how to teach and foster interpersonal skills for students during their course

Q12 Soft-skill training should be part of any key element of the UG curriculum such as the dissertation.

Q13 Soft-skill training should be included in any supervised practicum/work placement scheme by the university

Q14 Soft-skills can be better taught via specialist, inter-departmental modules across the university

Q15. "Realistic simulations" of real-life conditions are essential features for effective soft skill training.

Q16 Can you think of potential barriers and factors that can prevent implementation of soft skill training in HE? (open question)

Q17 What education/training should a soft skill trainer have? (open question)

Q18 Do you have any suggestions regarding feasibility issues in soft skill training in HE? (open question)

Roadmap

Outline of Co-Creation Workshop

1) In order for each institution to create its own roadmap, basic elements, knowledge, conclusions that were emerged from all previous work and outputs of the project should be taken into consideration and presented to the participants of the workshop. For example:

o Systematic Review

- Main results of meta-analysis
- Structure and content of the course
- Assessment of the course
- Structure and content of the seminar
- Assessment of the seminar
- Background analysis -People
- Background analysis -Strategy
- Background analysis -Processes
- Results of the focus group
- Survey results

2) Each institution should decide what fits best as practice and process to deliver soft skills training to its members. UoC proposed the partners to have already taken a decision upon three or four alternatives practices and processes and present the pros and cons for each practice to the participants of the workshop and alternative ideas.

3) In order to promote the sense of co-creation, UoC proposed to divide the participants into working groups so as to discuss upon the three or four alternatives for 20-30 minutes.

4) Each working group discussed the alternatives and they presented their ideas and their decision regarding the best practice and process during the plenary session.

5) UoC urged partners to ask each working group to set a representative for expressing group's ideas and decision.

6) At the end the plenary session concluded which practice and process would be feasible for the institution to follow in a 2-year potential planning.

Key delivery outcome of workshop

The roadmap answers the following two questions:

1) What form should soft skills' training ideally take during the course of an undergrad programme (from the moment a student sets foot at the university till the moment s/he graduates)

2) If there are three phases of implementation (Phase 0: where we are now, Phase 1: Where we will be next year, Phase 2: Where we will be in 3-5 year) how should we proceed to gradually reach the ideal outcome

These questions were addressed to all working groups.

PART B- RESULTS

CASE 1: PANEPISTIMIO KRITIS

BACKGROUND ANALYSIS

1. People

1.1. Structure

The University's central administration is organized through two General Directorates (fig. 5): Administrative and Financial Services and Technical & Systems Services

- Other Services include
- The Library
- Research Secretariat: Financial Management of Project Grants (ELKE)
- Property Management
- Special Units providing student support services include
- Employment and Career Service (DASTA)
- LLP/Erasmus
- Student Affairs Office
- Summer Schools
- Student Counselling Center
- Students Social Centre
- e-services for students and staff are part of the University's computer and network services which are coordinated by the Computer Centre. http://cict.uoc.gr/

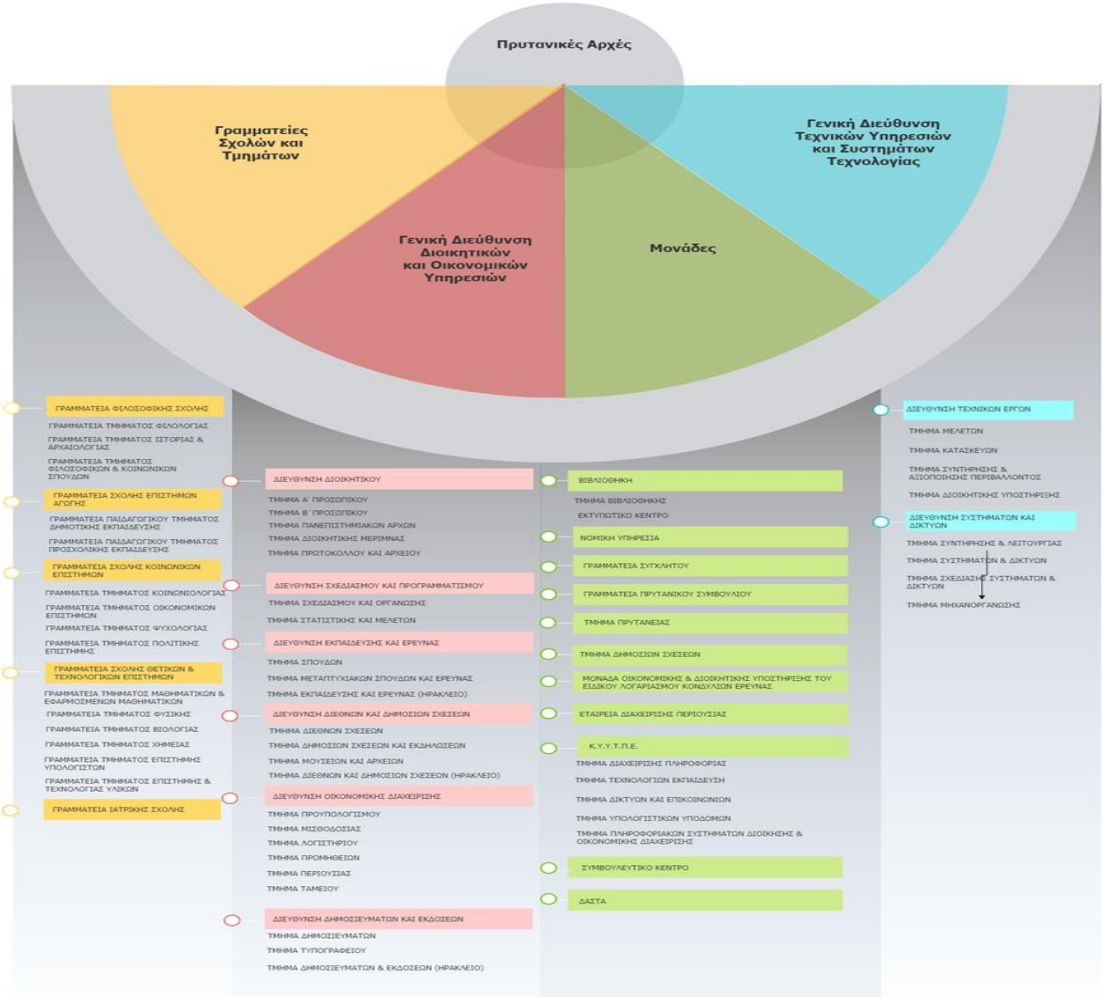


Figure 5

1.2 People

People that can contribute to the education of transversal skills come from three academic departments (Department of Philosophy and Social Studies, Department of Primary Education and Department of Psychology), the Career and Liaison Office and the Trainee Internship Office and The Student Counseling Center. An initial search contact with the heads of departments produced the names of 9 faculty members and 5 employees that have knowledge on skills education. The person that most of these people refer to is the Deputy Rector for Academic Affairs, Lifelong Learning, International Relations & Outlook. In terms of administrative issues the person in charge is the Head of the General Directorate of Administrative & Financial Services.

1.3 Stakeholders

The point of contact of UoC with **stakeholders** comes from an "Extraversion committee" that comprises members of UOC as well as entrepreneurs from the local community, from the Trainee Internship Office as well as the Career and Liaison Office.

1.4 Students

Students have representatives in all departments but prefer to act as a whole body rather than through representatives. There are no student body representatives for the whole university.

2. University Strategy (HEI long-term processes)

UoC refers to the development of skills for its graduates in both its mission and strategic plan.

2.1 Mission

While the mission of UoC (https://en.uoc.gr/university/vision) does not specifically refer to skills, it does refer to capabilities and talents of students.

"The mission of the University of Crete is to generate and transmit scientific knowledge, to prepare new scientists and scholars for its application, and to contribute to the advancement of human culture. These goals are achieved by pursuing close links between research and education, by encouraging scientific dialogue and by utilizing the capabilities and talents of staff and students."

2.2 Strategic plan

The 2018-2025 strategic plan of the University (https://www.modip.uoc.gr/sites/default/files/files/UoC%20Strategic%20Plan%202018-2025_EN.pdf) has 6 axes, the second of which is "An attractive educational centre for young scientists and responsible citizens". Within this axis the strategic plan mentions:

"..the skills required of University graduates differ from those that were desirable or necessary in the 20th century. Aware of these trends, the UoC aims to equip students

with the necessary skills and competences to cope with the associated challenges, and to improve their career prospects, by cultivating critical learning, academic breadth, real problem solving, collaborative skills, an understanding of reality in the fields of science, society and the economy as well as a sense of social responsibility." (p.3)

Therefore there is reference to specific skills, as well and their relationship to broader society. Moreover, UoC commits to "Develop study programmes (undergraduate and postgraduate) in subjects in high demand from society and the economy that utilize areas of excellence which exist today in the UoC" (p.4), thereby explicitly offering a skills training connection to the needs of outside stakeholders within the economy and society.

2.3 Broader institutional/legal considerations

UoC is subject to the evaluation and accreditation of the Higher Authority of Higher Education (HAHE- formerly HQA) and now holds an accreditation that is valid through 2023. Both strategic plans and internal quality assurance systems are evaluated according to processes laid out by HAHE.

(https://www.modip.uoc.gr/sites/default/files/files/CERTIFICATE_English.pdf)

3. Educating transversal skills (HEI short term processes)

There are four channels of education for transversal skills at UoC.

3.1 Academic departments

Each member of faculty can propose a course that is initially submitted for approval to the departmental committee of undergraduate studies and then to the departmental general assembly. If approved, the proposed course becomes part of the undergraduate program of studies. The status of the course can be re-assessed if there are especially negative evaluations by the students or if it is decided so during an internal or external departmental evaluation process. Each course runs for 13 weeks and there is usually one 3-hour meeting per week. There are two semesters per year, one winter and one summer semester.

3.2 Counselling center

The counselling center offers short trainings. Their content and duration is decided by the members of the counselling center and the nature of its work.

3.3 Employment and career service

The employment and career service offers short trainings. Their content and duration is decided by the members of the department and the nature of its work.

3.4 Centre for Teaching and Learning,

The Training of the Trainers (TotT@UOC) initiative first started as a pilot bottom-up staff initiative of the University of Crete in 2019. The initial goal was the development of

a culture of exchanging good teaching practices between teaching staff and Faculty members of the University of Crete. TotT was transformed into Centre for Teaching and Learning. Within three years, TotT managed to gain the support and recognition from the members of the academic community and in 2022 it is at its fourth year faculty development activity.

The Centre was supported by the Ministry of Education through an ESPA project 'Development of Staff' of the Ministry of Education (2022). The ESPA programme's main objective is to enhance smooth administration of Faculty development activities in Higher Education Institutions in Greece and dissemination of excellent Higher Education pedagogies. In the same year, the Centre was also supported by the European Union through the European research project Erasmus+ (COALITION). The main mission of the European project COALITION includes the exchange of good practices of inclusive and student-centered learning pedagogies (i-SCP) in order to transform faculty development and to assist the self-regulation of students and professors. The participants in this project are academics who make their teaching more inclusive, to facilitate knowledge through supportive frameworks to the general academic body of their university, based on student needs. Participants will exchange experiences, ideas, opinions and good practices with other faculty members from other universities. For further information visit https://tott.uoc.gr/blog/programs/historical-overview-of-the-centre-for-teaching-and-learning-university-of-crete

3.5 Knowledge Transfer Office (KTO)

The objective of the Knowledge Transfer Office (KTO) is:

a) To stimulate the research community in the matter of research exploitation,
b) To support the researchers of the UoC on capitalizing on their research results;
c) To support researchers' networking in finding suitable collaboration partners, willing to commercialize their research work
The core operating principal of the Knowledge Transfer Office (KTO) is: «Knowledge as a service to the society»
The vision of the KTO may be summarized into: «Taking into account the viable growth and the social prosperity, our goal is to enable the researchers turning their novel ideas into innovations».
A short-term goal of the Knowledge Transfer Office (KTO) of the UoC is: «preventing the best students and scientists leaving Crete»

FOREGROUND ANALYSIS

1. Soft skills training formats: when "one size does not fit all"

Reflecting on both the used and available formats, methods, and techniques for SS training and development, stakeholders do not give precedence to one way of doing things (over another). Independent or embedded courses, at the departmental or the university level, seminar-based run outside Uni or as part of the curriculum were all discussed as potential approaches and formats. These views acknowledged that there are different things to consider in designing SS training and that different approaches cater different needs and can be appropriate given spatio-temporal restrictions (fig. 6).

Indicatively, feedback from stakeholders with experience on training in SS through the counseling centers at UoC was positive, and the same was true for the UoC departmental course (an optional course) suggesting that both these approaches merit further exploration, design, and development. There was even the suggestion the SS seminars should run as part of the curriculum at the departmental level.

> *Student: "… so then came the workshop (departmental course) led by Dr. D. things made sense, everything got their… right place in my mind".*
> *Liaison Office: "I believe that we could have cycles of courses, erm seminars …for SS training within each department".*

The idea or psychoeducational groups (fixed and long term) was further discussed by another participant who, however, did not address whether having them as part or alongside the curriculum:

> *Lifelong Learning Counsellor: "That is, these groups should have a continuation, they should have… should be closed, I should start there, so they should say I will have 8 meetings with this fixed group of 12 people or they should have a periodicity, a stability. They should create a feeling of security, so that I can share my experience, so that I can reflect over what has happened to me…"*

Embedded courses and practices within (but also peripheral to or even outside) University life such as for example the Erasmus program, thesis completion, free expression courses, as well as opportunities for participation in events (e.g. TEDx), and internships, were identified too as key formats to SS development:

> *Labour Market Representative: "The story about SS I believe they can't be an independent standalone course, they should be the outcome of the educational process. That is, one can sit and scientifically study the concept of soft skills, but when you are a student under training that [being trained in SS] is something that you should not be able to perceive, but soft skills should have been trained, at the end of the day, as part of the educational process. So not to be taught about soft skills (emphasis placed)."*

Focusing on the micro level and the most valued techniques to be used for soft skills training, it seemed that those that simulate reality such as role-playing,

experiential exercises, simulations, team-teaching and the like take precedence over more theoretical-lecture based techniques. Such views carry with them what is probably the strongest and most highlighted message to take from this FG, and which is presented right next.

2. "Let's cut to the chase": real-life experiences and their transformative power should be at the center of SS training

If there was one approach that was discussed with more enthusiasm and warmth that was clearly about integrating theory with practice:

> *Labour Market Representative: " You should "marry" a little more, if I may say that, the theoretical and the practical. Not the practical (emphatic tone) as a part as the one tenth of a series of lectures but the practical that is in constant interaction with the theoretical".*

There is, on the one hand this sense of complementarity between theory and practice that emerges through the reflections of the stakeholders:

> *Student: "… the theoretical part [we know it] exists, we know it, we learn it, great. Then the experience is what links everything together, and that we kind of understand better how we should respond to every circumstance (tone of question) […] with soft skills too and in general (small pause) yes, and then for sure then comes a better understanding of self".*

On the other hand, an important distinction becomes the centre of the discussion about the link between theory and practice, whereby practice should be pursued though exposure to real-life situations rather than through in-vitro experiences:

> *Lifelong Learning Counsellor: "So, what I have to say from my experience is that the lab environment [in-vitro] the laboratory conditions we all seek to create in order to teach, to transfer rea-life conditions can't be no other than the actual real-life conditions. Here is what I mean to say. When we are in a psychoeducational group and disucss about decisions making, critical thinking, conflict resolution, effective communication, we should create real-life conditions. Experiential learning and exercises are not (emphasis placed) an actual representation of life. You need actual life. That is, this [ss training] should not prepare us for what comes next. It should be it (emphasis placed), to experience conflict, to experience having to make an actual decision. And test myself in this (emphasis placed)."*

> *Labour Market Representative: "I heard earlier about the role-playing story and other actions, and they are very useful but they are in-vitro. So you express your opinion and this has no cost. However, when you start trying out your opinion in real-life situations then you see your own limits, how much you can endure, your desires, your relations with others."*

Because such a view was universal when discussing the training that people should have received to be able to train for SS, there was a mention to participation in similar transformative experiences (in real-life situations), alongside ideas for specialization in social sciences and seeking professional development though exposure to initiatives such as the open auditorium.

3. Which? When? Where?

Variables such as which soft skills to train, when (and for how long) during the four years of undergraduate study, and where (for which disciplines and or occupations) are important to consider when discussing approaches and formats for soft skills training in HE. Claiming, however, that there is a consensus as to their unique and clear contribution into the soft skills training equation is problematic. Stakeholders make the case for practicing SS such as decision making, critical thinking, and conflict management in real-life situations or emotional intelligence through participation to psychoeducational groups; stakeholders also referred to the impossibility of training SS to an extent. However, they did acknowledge that a sort of prioritization can take place with areas of soft skills that are in a way prerequisites for developing other SS.

> *Lifelong Learning Centre Director: "There are skills, that you know well, A and A, if you allow me, that they function that they flow into one another. Resilience is one of these. Moreover, there are skills that are not clearly defined. They are not skills even. But they are prerequisites for skills development. […] The principle of tolerance which is these days an important conquest in current societies, that all scales of intolerance go up. Despite the political correctness intolerance scales rise in Europe. The principle of tolerance which is a great conquest is not reported as skill. But, for example, to learn the depersonalization of difference in the auditorium. That is, I receive criticism from a student and this does not mean that we disagree between us even ideologically, […] The depersonalization of different is a very good start for tolerance".*

In more than one cases, stakeholders identified metacognitive skills (knowing how to learn) and loving to learn as priority for soft skills training.

> *Labour Market Representative: "Teach them how to love (emphasis placed) learning and show them how to learn. From this point onwards knowledge is open, is evolves and if s/he, I don't want them to leave and tear the books. I want them to leave school and be a happy person that is happy because s/he was found in an environment where s/he was happy because they learnt new things about, how should I say, about planet earth, about our culture about our life and therefore when you create a happy person this person will be creative too.[..] If I were "*

> *Lifelong Learning Centre Director: "In our job, it is my opinion, that metacognitive skills are very important, metacognitive skills (emphasis placed). Also, I should add, that is to learn how to learn. Why? Because there is so much information these days that this [metacognitive skills help] critically reflect on it. And this will be needed in real life too.*

With regards to the factor of time, a potential need to ease in students with training in areas of soft skills typically valued at the university such as critical thinking, adaptability, problem solving during the first year was expressed. Moreover, there was a subtle consensus that soft skills training should run throughout the different study years.

When it comes to duration, stakeholders suggest based on their gained experience from the pilot SS courses run that:

> *"Liaison Officer 2: "… these meetings should at least eight so that students have the opportunity to try things out and see these things at how and have time because there is much condensed knowledge."*

Finally with regards to how occupation/discipline may play in differentiating SS training, there was a group of participants that did not see this as appropriate:

> *Liaison Officer 2: "I don't find that SS training should be differentiated based on the occupation/discipline, as I find that for example a student studying Math is expected to have problems skills [as much as a student of a different discipline] not sure s/he can demonstrate problem solving from the start or it would be helpful to work on it early in his/her studies"*

The opposite view was shared too:

> *Liaison Officer 1: "Yes, I think I mentioned it before, that working on a skill, what this skills should be depends on the profession, the monograph let's say, that is what sort of requirements there are in this profession. For example, philologists may need to have more critical thnking [compared to other professions], so I will give priority to this. A different thing I thought about was the sorts of learning outcomes different disciplines have set. I embed soft skills in this context, what each school/departnemtn wishes to promote in terms of learning outcomes, for example the department of literature in UoC (indicatively), what wishes to promote the Aristoteleion University of Thessaloniki."*

And this disagreement became more passionate later:

> *Labour Market Representative: "Well I will disagree with LO1. I don't believe (emphasis placed)… my response is not to everything! I believe in the "integrated human" [homo universalis]. That is, I believe that our Universities should help develop the integrated human. What does this mean, now. This is not to say that different occupations and professions do not require specific skills. […] That is I think we are at a point in our western civilization, to develop integrated citizens. And citizens, how should I say, in the deepest sense of the term. Then someone is really good at what they do and they will be efficient too."*

4. What about the evaluation of SS training?

Brief was the reference of the participants to the potential evaluation methods spanning from questionnaires, follow-up sessions, and participation to focus groups, to

the actual evidence on work performance and real-life efficiency. Work performance and efficiency, in turn, was approached through the idea of the "integrated human" again:

> *Labour Market Representative: "But right now if one is not an integrated human– and I think this is the answer as to how to measure effectiveness of SS traning– Well we will measure it by the happy person, the integrated citizen. That is I think we are at a point in our western civilization, to develop integrated citizens. And citizens, how should I say, in the deepest sense of the term. Then someone is really good at what they do and they will be efficient too."*

5. Context, context, context: the various contextual variables that play in the design and implementation of SS training

At the pragmatic level, an interaction and osmosis between the contexts of universities and the (local) labour market was stressed, with suggestions including the mobilization of institutionalized and fixed consultation processes, and tools such as the emergence R&D departments.

At the conceptual level too, context emerged as important in considering SS education in HE. For one, stakeholders stressed some contextual barriers to the implementation of the SS. These were identified at three levels: *the educational context, the labour market, and the prospective employees themselves*.

Contextual barriers of the educational context included the challenges the transition from high school to university places to students, the established models of education and demands of academic staff:

> *Liaison Officer 2*:**"**So in that sense I think that in case we repeat the [SS training] programmes we believe that it would be important to have enough time, because as I believe you know, change does not come automatically. When there are established models over the years to change these patterns and have a new automatic one replacing the old automatic one need change [meant time]."
>
> *[…] "They are asked to think and act with a different way in their courses, to work differently with their projects, to be more creative. This is without being trained to do so however. It is as if it is expected from them, this is how I see it, as it is expected that they have it ready".*

Other issues relating to the educational context that can prove problematic related to a warehousing approach towards developing scientists that, in some cases could lead to a form of "institutionalization":

> *Labour Market Representative: "… Because, pay attention (laughs) we should not, in my opinion, produce scientists that will simply be tools in the… how should I say, in the labour market mechanism, we should produce [people with] open minds.That is we should create people that are charmed by, that are happy to learn, to be able to feel the happiness of creation, that you are happy to learn, then*

you are very creative in your own life, so you can do different things mostly because you like what you have learned to do and you want to develop further . So, to open the spaces a bit, to move away from institutionalization, because there is institutionalization".

Barriers identified relating to the labour market context include the short length of internships, the suggested University commitment towards normative goals, as well as the impossibility of aligning the university outcomes to labour market requirements (and rhythm) as shown next:

Lifelong Learning Centre Director: "Aligning and shaping University based on the labour marker (4s pause) in terms of a value system, I don't agree with. But even if I could agree with this this can't happen as it [the labour market" has its own quick pace. So bringing in to the game "what the labour market dictates" but the labour market transforms quicker! So whatever is today's outcome tomorrow won't apply. It will take [the University] 5 years to get there."

This, in labour market terms, means having to deal with fluid and often complex environments:

Labour Market Representative: "And it is the first time that we look to have around us people that are complete personalities, or to move towards that. And everything else needs to go next. To be able to manage that very complex, multifaceted, difficult environment. […] So you want strong minds […] that can simultaneously realise what is going on and offer solutions over this new reality that is new to everyone."

Moreover, this can translate to being prepared to move around, to adjust and adapt as an (prospective) employee:

Student: "In our even younger generation, being in one area, be there, but for sure you will need to change various job positions. Around the same area of your studies, for sure, but can be anything. So, SS will come handy everywhere…everywhere. Basically in all areas of work. Even an IT person, s/he might have a position working alone indeed. But then s/he might need for an IT to get involved in … recruitment, to interact with HR people and have… so s/he will then have to be an extravert, when he was an introvert before".

Barriers were identified, finally, with regards to the prospective employees relating, inter-alia, to issues of self-image and formal qualifications:

Labour Market Representative: "They come overqualified when in fact they have an enormous problem with what we call soft skills. They come to us very often with their strong degrees, but I would say they are defeated already at this stage (3s pause). They don't – and I think this can be an element added to their education during their studies– they have not been engaged in real-life actions/activities"

[…] "We do have people that are incredibly capable who cannot, however, take initiatives. Where is the big problem? They either have difficulty in working as part of big groups or they cannot set timelines within these groups and say that they should be efficient. These are very important issues when one leaves science and education and moves to the labour market".

At this level, important for the design, and effective implementation of soft skills relating to students was also the need for students to set their goals straight:

Liaison Officer 1: "What we mentioned before about the ability to learn, I believe it has to do very much with the goal. I think young people coming to study they were either found here at random, or they follow their parent's dreams. […] I think it is important to have a clear goal about where I go to be able to work also on skills".

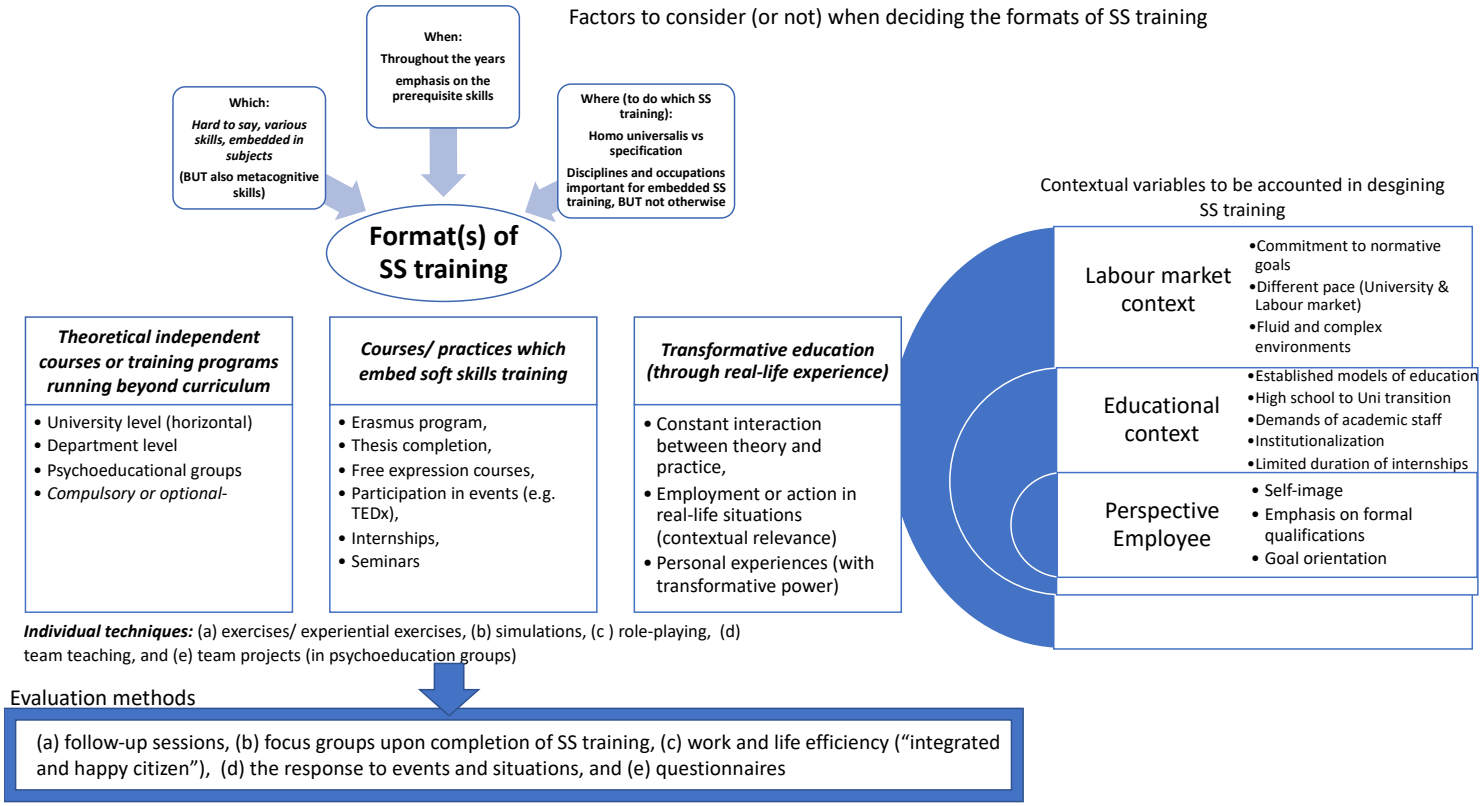

Factors to consider (or not) when deciding the formats of SS training
When:
Throughout the years
emphasis on the prerequisite skills
Which:
Hard to say, various skills, embedded in subjects
(BUT also metacognitive skills)
Where (to do which SS training):
Homo universalis vs specification
Disciplines and occupations important for embedded SS training, BUT not otherwise
Format(s) of SS training
Theoretical independent courses or training programs running beyond curriculum
• University level (horizontal)
• Department level
• Psychoeducational groups
• Compulsory or optional-
Courses/ practices which embed soft skills training
• Erasmus program,
• Thesis completion,
• Free expression courses,
• Participation in events (e.g. TEDx),
• Internships,
• Seminars
Transformative education (through real-life experience)
• Constant interaction between theory and practice,
• Employment or action in real-life situations (contextual relevance)
• Personal experiences (with transformative power)
Contextual variables to be accounted in desgining SS training
Labour market context
•Commitment to normative goals
•Different pace (University & Labour market)
•Fluid and complex environments
Educational context
•Established models of education
•High school to Uni transition
•Demands of academic staff
•Institutionalization
•Limited duration of internships
Perspective Employee
• Self-image
• Emphasis on formal qualifications
• Goal orientation
Individual techniques: (a) exercises/ experiential exercises, (b) simulations, (c) role-playing, (d) team teaching, and (e) team projects (in psychoeducation groups)
Evaluation methods
(a) follow-up sessions, (b) focus groups upon completion of SS training, (c) work and life efficiency (“integrated and happy citizen”), (d) the response to events and situations, and (e) questionnaires

Figure 6

Code Key

1. **How [through what format(s)] can soft skills training be implemented in higher education?**

(a) Training formats (or approaches) and individual techniques – University based

(a1) Theoretical independent courses or training programs running beyond curriculum: these concern optional horizontal courses at the University level, cycles of departmental courses (compulsory or optional) and psychoeducational closed (and relatively stable groups) (potentially run by the counseling centers)

(a2) Courses/ practices which embed soft skills training: such as the Erasmus program, thesis completion, free expression courses, opportunities for participation in events (e.g. TEDx), internships, seminars that promote and enhance students' agency and soft skills development (as part of the educational process).

(a3) Transformative education (through real-life experience): reference to constant interaction between theory and practice (a holistic approach), employment or action in real-life situations (contextual relevance, e. g. employment of students in university facilities) and personal experiences (with transformative power).

(a4) Individual techniques: such as exercises/ experimental exercises, simulations, role-playing, team teaching and team projects (in psychoeducation groups).

(b) Training qualification of teachers: reference to the "open auditorium" initiative (aiming at offering staff teaching support), seminar attendance (cultivating creativity), training-participation in transformative experiences (psychoeducational groups, change of mindset) or pursuing a specialization-training in the field of social sciences.

(c) Contribution of employers and labour market to the SS training

(c1) Feedback (university-employer visibility): reference to needs exploration of SS at the local markets, to annual systematic, institutionalized, and fixed consultation processes and to the permanent open interaction and osmosis between the university and the labour market.

(c2) Tools: such as the National Market Diagnostic Mechanism, the dynamism of the skills and the emergence R&D departments.

2. **<u>Should (and how could) soft skills training be adapted based on the following criteria?</u>**

(a) Factor relating to soft skills categories

(a1) Differentiation based on soft skills category: reference to the fluidity between the soft skills categories (difficult to classify and differentiate), the practice of some SS (decision making, critical thinking, conflict management and effective communication) in real-life situations, the training of some SS in psychoeducational groups (decisions making, critical thinking, conflict management and effective communication, and emotional intelligence) and the impossibility of training some SS.

(a2i) Prioritization in training based on soft skills categories: including certain SS (for example depersonalization of diversity/acceptance, tolerance for other SS) as a prerequisite for other soft skills, determining the order of their training according to job/professional demands and departmental policies.

(a2ii) Other priorities relating to (soft) skills training: there was a mention to metacognitive skills (learning how to learn) and cultivating love for learning.

(b) The time factor

(b1) Levels of SS the training (years of study): including SS on areas identified as key for university learning in the first year of study (for example critical thinking, adaptability, problem solving), in the second year (other SS), and their training throughout the studies.

(b2) Duration in soft skills training: including various views such as the need for extended sessions (more than 8 meetings as in the programme run at UoC), the link between SS categories and duration, and the difficulty in specifying durations when SS training is embedded (depending on the discipline).

(c) The occupation and discipline factor: this includes the non-differentiation of SS training and education based on the occupational field (but also, by contrast, the potential use of professional monographs to identify which skills to train) and also the innate embeddedness of some SS categories training in the various disciplines from the disciplines.

3. **How could the effectiveness of soft skills training be measured?**

(a) Evaluation methods: include the follow-up, the participation to focus groups upon completion of SS training, the actual performance at work and the effectiveness felt in life ("integrated and happy citizen", homo universalis), the response to events and situations (academia and life) and questionnaires
(b) Evaluation time/interval: include measurement at the 3 months and after 6 months up to 1 year (indicatively).

4. **Other: How skills training could be implemented in the labour market**

(a) Training approaches/format in the labour market

(a1) Theoretical approach: including taught seminars

(a2) Practices that integrate soft skills training/ practicing SS: such as projects, employee training and development in (out of work environment) projects, practices like the re-generation program (education and employment) and non-formal education models.

5. **Other: What is the context for SS education**

(a) Limitations

(a1) In the education context: reference to the transition from high school to university, established models (in learning, need for time for change), limited duration of internships (development as a formal process) and academic teachers' demands.

(a2) At the labour market: reference to the normative commitment of the university by society at large and its inability to adapt to the rhythms of the labour market.

(a3) With regards to prospective employees: including graduates' emphasis on formal qualifications, incomplete/underdeveloped soft skills and the formation of an oversized self-image.

(b) Need to introduce soft skills in education: including the turnover of workers in their jobs, in compensating for possible shortfalls in formal qualifications, the emphasis placed by employers, the emphasis on collective intelligence (good minds, integrated personalities, part influences whole), the existence of fluid-difficult environments (adaptability of workers) and the reference to soft skills as life skills.

(c) Soft skills training prerequisites: which include an awareness of students' needs, a move away from distance teaching (unilateral model), a move away from institutionalism (scientists only as tools in the labour market) and the existence of a clear goal-direction.

6. **Other: making better use of HR in the labour market**

(a) Mode of integration: reference to grouped categories of workers characterized by common references and shared experiences.

ROADMAP

UoC organized the Co-Creation Workshop "LEVEL UP Train the Trainer (TtT) activity" after the completion of both background and foreground analyses. The invitation was distributed to all faculty and administrative members of UoC. Furthermore, the invitation was sent selectively to senior students. The content of the invitation is the following:

Invitation to register for the LEVEL UP Train the Trainer (TtT) activity

The Erasmus+ project Setting the ground for a multi-level approach on developing soft skills in Higher Education - Level Up is looking for participants!

Description

Dates: **29-31 August 2022**
Format: **OnLine training**
Total number of participants: **≤ 5 Participants per organisation**

Information

We are pleased to invite you to participate in the Erasmus+ Project's Train the Trainer (TtT) training activity "Setting the ground for a multi-level approach on developing soft skills in Higher Education (HE) - Level Up". The main objectives of the project are a) to provide new knowledge on the development of soft skills for students, b) to develop innovative training materials and tools for soft skills training and c) to integrate all generated materials into an applicable framework for soft skills training.

The project is carried out by a consortium of organisations from 4 EU countries (Cyprus, the Netherlands, Spain and Greece) under the supervision of Prof. Georgia Panayiotou of the Department of Psychology, University of Cyprus. For the University of Crete, the Scientific Coordinator of the project is Assistant Professor. Panagiota Dimitropoulou of the Department of Psychology.

The philosophy of the programme is based on the reduction of the skills mismatch with the labour market and the needs of adaptation in the 21st century. The common assumption is that in the 21st century, Higher Education (HE) needs to focus on preparing students for work, actively engaging individuals as citizens as well as promoting their well-being more broadly.

Although TE students usually graduate with excellent academic and technical skills, which are essential for their employability, it is largely debated whether they have sufficiently developed soft skills, which are equally important for their success. General, 'soft' skills beyond academic knowledge, such as the ability to work collaboratively, pro-social behaviour, effective communication, innovation and creativity, critical thinking and problem-solving, and adaptability, are emerging as valuable tools for meeting modern demands.

Within the framework of this project, a limited number of university members are given the opportunity to participate in a short training activity (12 hours) through which they will be introduced to the project, its main deliverables, as well as trained in the material produced, which concerns the development of soft skills for students.

Due to the uncertain course of the coronavirus pandemic, the training activity - which was to take place at the University of Crete (Rethymnon) - is being transferred entirely to an online format.

Educational Objectives

The TtT aims to:

- Provide an opportunity for participants from different organisations to work together to further develop soft skills education in Higher Education,
- Enhance the visibility of cross-cutting skills and their value within academic education,

- Facilitate participants in acquiring new knowledge and transferring knowledge to their organisation,
- Promote common practices among the consortium organisations.

Participants' profile

Approximately 20-25 participants from the consortium organisations are invited to be trained on the latest developments in soft skills education as articulated by the project deliverables and to discuss ideas for further development of soft skills education in higher education institutions.

Eligible participants may be academic teaching staff or professionals (administrative staff) from university departments such as Mental Health Centre, Career Centre, etc. Participants must be able to participate in English. In case of a large number of applications, the selection committee may take into account additional selection criteria such as:

- Graduates in social, behavioral or administrative sciences such as: psychology, education, social work and management.
- Holders of Level 7c (Masters) or Level 8 (PhD) of the EQF from a recognised University.
- Significant contribution to the University's teaching work in a soft skills development area and/or supervision of other staff providing equivalent training.
- A commitment to full participation in the training activity.
- Proficiency in English demonstrated through one of the following: TOEFL (600), IELTS (6), GCE (B) or equivalent, unless candidates hold a degree from an English-speaking institution.
- Involvement in previous phases of the project will be considered an advantage.**Κόστος**

Participation in the educational activity is **free of charge**.

Deadline for submitting a declaration of interest

20 July 2022, 23:59 (Central European Time)

How to submit an expression of interest

All interested candidates should express their interest by filling in the following online form: **https://forms.office.com/r/SEQHRvzscL**

For further information please contact:

Dr. Dimitropoulou Panagiota, Scientific Coordinator of the project for the University of Crete (p.dimitropoulou@uoc.gr) and Dr. Alexios Arvanitis (a.arvanitis@uoc.gr), faculty members of the Department of Psychology of the University of Crete.

**The project has received funding from the Erasmus+ KA2 programme of the European Union (E+KA2/2020-2023) under grant agreement no. 2020-1-CY01-KA203-065985 (LEVEL UP, http://level-up-project.eu /).*

During the Co-Creation Workshop members of the Uoc team had a short presentation in accordance with the guidelines proposed at Consortium Meeting 7. The participants that applied for the Workshop were 30 members from the UoC.
The UoC team had a short lecture on the main steps and results of the Intellectual outputs of the program as they were formatted for the University of Crete (See fig.7).

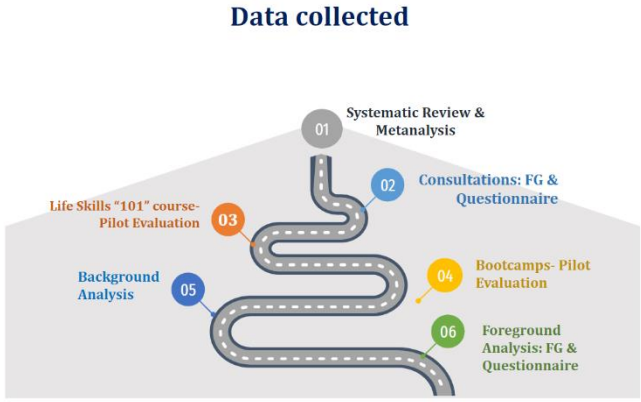


Figure 7

After the presentation, participants were involved in 5 breakout rooms for 20-30 minutes for completing the following tasks:

a) recording their opinions on the most appropriate type of soft skills training at the undergraduate level,

b) and considering that there are three phases of implementation (Phase 0: Where are we now, Phase 1: Where will we be next year, Phase 2: Where will we be in 3-5 years) how the UoC should proceed to gradually reach the ideal result? (See fig. 8)

Figure 8

For facilitating the procedure each group had to complete the same Working sheet (See fig. 9) that consisted of five basic parts regarding:

a) **Subject**: Type of soft skills training

- Seminar
- Elective course
- Institutional course
- Course in the framework of the practicum training
- Other

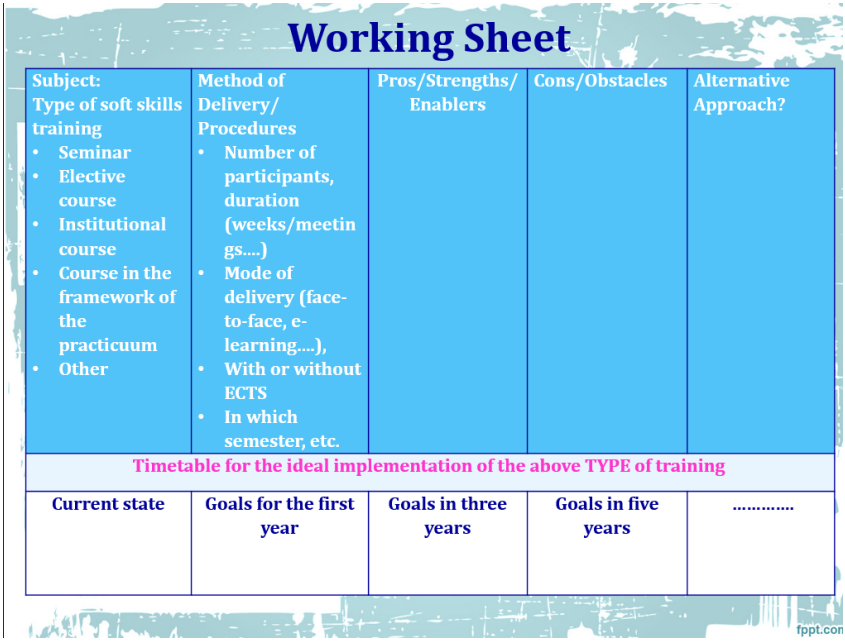
b) **Method of Delivery/Procedures**

c) **Pros/Strengths/ Enablers**

d) **Cons/Obstacles**

e) **Alternative approach**

Also the participants would consider on a timetable for the implementation of the proposed type of training on a long-term basis.



Working Sheet

Subject: Type of soft skills training • Seminar • Elective course • Institutional course • Course in the framework of the practicuum • Other	Method of Delivery/ Procedures • Number of participants, duration (weeks/meetings....) • Mode of delivery (face-to-face, e-learning....), • With or without ECTS • In which semester, etc.	Pros/Strengths/ Enablers	Cons/Obstacles	Alternative Approach?
Timetable for the ideal implementation of the above TYPE of training				
Current state	Goals for the first year	Goals in three years	Goals in five years	.....

Figure 9

Outcomes of the working groups

a) Subject

Each group dealt with a different sector type of soft skills training of the University of Crete, namely:

- **Group 1:** Academic Courses
- **Group 2**: Courses through other learning sectors apart from the academic departments (e.g. Centre for Teaching and Learning, Centre of Training and Lifelong Learning of UoC)
- **Group 3:** Courses through other non-academic infrastracture (e.g. Student Counseling Center, Career and Liaison Office)
- **Group 4:** Training linked to students' practicum training

- **Group 5:** Other ways of informing and educating students apart from the above infrastructure and procedures of UoC

b) Method of Delivery/Procedures

- **Group 1:**

- Lectures to large audiences (institutional courses, compulsory courses) focused on soft skills development
- Seminars-Workshops in small audiences focused on soft skills development
- Integration of soft skills development into existing courses

- **Group 2**:
  Training of teaching staff to assist them in the training/development of their students in the field soft skills.
- **Group 3:**

- Psychoeducational counselling groups (8 - 10 participants, weekly x 8 meetings)
- Experiential seminars (15 - 20 participants, face-to-face, 3 hours each), in all semesters
- **Group 4:**
- Experiential vocational guidance/orientation workshop
- Career management workshop (mainly older years)
- Link to the labour market
- In person or online linked to practicum training and ECTS
- **Group 5:**
- Freshmen' Week
- Getting to know the University and the city of Rethymno in the first phase (guided tours, introductions to cultural institutions, cultural groups of the University, etc.)
- "Getting to know each other" initiated by faculty members
- Mentorship
- Ensuring continuity of action of student groups involved in communication and cooperation (e.g. radio stations, environmental actions)
- Graduation Week

- Promotion and strengthening of the activities of all types of student groups

c) Pros/Strengths/ Enablers

- **Group 1:**
- Skills development for a large number of students
- Courses are participatory/interactive
- **Group 2**:
- Understanding the need to cultivate all kinds of skills (presentation of different ways to achieve this through the meetings)
- Positive impact on students
- **Group 3:**
- Experiential learning, interaction, social interaction, learning new skills, sharing.
- **Group 4:**
- Large audience
- Link to the curriculum and practicum training, where available
- Familiarization with skills requirements on the part of employers
- **Group 5:**
- Knowledge of the context
- Opportunities for involvement, employment, etc.
- Common ground of reference
- Reference person

d) Cons/Obstacles

- **Group 1:**
- Courses are not so participatory/interactive
- Development of skills in a small number of students
- Lack of teacher training
- **Group 2**:
- Low participation of teaching staff
- No time to participate
- Absence of motivation

- **Group 3:**
- Small number of meetings
- Limited technical equipment & venue
- Limited time of the staff of e.g. Student Counseling Center.
- **Group 4:**
- Depends on the institution that hosts the practicum in Heraklion Rethymnon
- Practicum institutions connected with the departments of the UoC and the needs
- What happens when students do not participate in practicum?
- **Group 5:**
- Participation
- Communication to students
- Lack of the mechanisms in the institution that will have the responsibility
- Commitment of students that will take on the role of mentor

e) Alternative approach

- **Group 1:**
- Word café
- Participation of academic visitors from other universities
- Experiential exercises
- **Group 2**:
- Empowerment of internal motivation: To create a sense (recognition) of need, reflection,
- External motivation: a) Positions of responsibility, b) Evaluation (by students)
- **Group 3:**
- Mandatory attendance for freshmen
- Expanding collaboration with other departments and faculty members.
- **Group 4:**
- Supervisor training groups (Training of the Trainers – ToTT)
- **Group 5:**
- Exploiting mentorship

ROADMAP OF THE UNIVERSITY of CRETE

Phase 0

- **There is provision for soft skills in the strategic plan of the UoC - General reporting on actions that should be implemented**
- **Soft skills training is included in the course outlines of all departments**
- **Limited courses specialised in Soft Skills are provided; individual workshops, psychoeducational counselling groups**

Phase 1

- Develop awareness throughout the academic community of the need for skills training (awareness-raising)/ Create an Institutional course/ Creation in some departments of specific courses/ training to integrate skills development in all courses/ creating a certain culture to students
- Strategic Planning of the Institution- Empowerment: Internal motivation: 1. to create a sense (recognition) of need, reflection - External motivation: 1. positions of responsibility, 2. evaluation (by students, colleagues, etc.)
- Explore the possibility of collaborating with other institutions in or out of UoC (e.g. organising meetings, lectures, presentations), in order to exchange views and schedule further actions for the next academic year, the possibility of providing opportunities for continuous training of staff, mapping of current student needs for more targeted activities, action to cultivate tolerance towards unpredictable events.
- Awareness-raising of departments, members of the academic community, acquaintance with procedures - specialization by years of students, interconnection of campuses e.g. with institutional workshops, actions
- Student Week from Academic Year 2022-23
- Pilot application "Getting to know each other" in a small number of departments
- Investigation of the role of the MSF in the institution of mentorship (information, training, supervision)
- Exploring the possibility of organising the graduation week

Phase 2

- Holistic approach with integration of education of Soft Skills in all subjects and specific skills training courses
- All teaching staff will recognise the need for self-improvement and will have learned how to transfer soft skills to their students through the course
- Strengthening of the SCC on staff level, ensuring minimum access for each student per academic year, interconnection with academic departments and other institutions within and outside the University, programming activities (e.g. workshops - presentations - speeches) in the context of awareness and promotion of mental health, creation of the possibility of student internships at the SCC, provision of continuing education for existing SCC staff, peer mentoring and volunteer action, cooperation with professors for exchanging ideas according to their experiences
- Ability to extend students' practicum and skills to a variety of institutions, changing the way academic supervisors operate
- Extended application of "Getting to know each other" in all departments
- Active role of MSF in the institution of mentorship (information, training, supervision)
- Implementation of graduation week

Main Idea

- **The strategic plan should take into account Soft Skills' educational process starting from students' enrollment in UoC till graduation**

ROADMAP του Πανεπιστημίου Κρήτης

Στόχος – η συν-διαμόρφωση ενός ενδεδειγμένου roadmap για το ΠΚ βραχυπρόθεσμα και μακροπρόθεσμα….

Φάση 0

- Υπάρχει πρόβλεψη για τις ήπιες δεξιότητες στο στρατηγικό σχέδιο του ΠΚ - Γενική αναφορά σε δράσεις που πρέπει να υλοποιηθούν
- Η κατάρτιση σε κοινωνικές δεξιότητες περιλαμβάνεται στα περιγράμματα μαθημάτων όλων των τμημάτων
- Παρέχονται περιορισμένα μαθήματα εξειδικευμένα στις ήπιες δεξιότητες- ατομικά εργαστήρια, ομάδες ψυχοεκπαιδευτικής συμβουλευτικής

Φάση 1

- Ανάπτυξη της ευαισθητοποίησης σε όλη την ακαδημαϊκή κοινότητα για την ανάγκη κατάρτισης σε δεξιότητες (ευαισθητοποίηση)/ Δημιουργία ενός θεσμικού μαθήματος/ Δημιουργία σε ορισμένα τμήματα ειδικών μαθημάτων/ κατάρτιση για την ενσωμάτωση της ανάπτυξης δεξιοτήτων σε όλα τα μαθήματα/ δημιουργία μιας συγκεκριμένης κουλτούρας στους φοιτητές
- Στρατηγικός σχεδιασμός του ιδρύματος- Ενδυνάμωση: Εσωτερικά κίνητρα: 1. να δημιουργηθεί μια αίσθηση (αναγνώριση) ανάγκης, προβληματισμού - Εξωτερικά κίνητρα: 1. θέσεις ευθύνης, 2. αξιολόγηση (από φοιτητές, συναδέλφους κ.λπ.)
- Διερεύνηση της δυνατότητας συνεργασίας με άλλα ιδρύματα εντός ή εκτός του ΠΚ(π.χ. διοργάνωση συναντήσεων, διαλέξεων, παρουσιάσεων), με σκοπό την ανταλλαγή απόψεων και τον προγραμματισμό περαιτέρω δράσεων για το επόμενο ακαδημαϊκό έτος, δυνατότητα παροχής ευκαιριών για συνεχή κατάρτιση του προσωπικού, χαρτογράφηση των τρεχουσών αναγκών των φοιτητών για πιο στοχευμένες δράσεις, δράση για την καλλιέργεια ανοχής απέναντι σε απρόβλεπτα γεγονότα.
- Ενημέρωση των τμημάτων, των μελών της ακαδημαϊκής κοινότητας, γνωριμία με τις διαδικασίες - εξειδίκευση ανά έτη των φοιτητών, διασύνδεση των πανεπιστημίων π.χ. με θεσμικές ημερίδες, δράσεις.
- Φοιτητική εβδομάδα από το ακαδημαϊκό έτος 2022-23
- Πιλοτική εφαρμογή "Γνωριμία μεταξύ μας" σε μικρό αριθμό τμημάτων
- Διερεύνηση του ρόλου του Μέντορα στο θεσμό της καθοδήγησης (ενημέρωση, εκπαίδευση, εποπτεία)
- Διερεύνηση της δυνατότητας διοργάνωσης της εβδομάδας αποφοίτησης

Φάση2

- Ολιστική προσέγγιση με ενσωμάτωση της εκπαίδευσης των ήπιων δεξιοτήτων σε όλα τα μαθήματα και σε μαθήματα κατάρτισης ειδικών δεξιοτήτων
- Όλο το διδακτικό προσωπικό θα αναγνωρίζει την ανάγκη για αυτοβελτίωση και θα έχει μάθει πώς να μεταφέρει τις κοινωνικές δεξιότητες στους μαθητές του μέσω του μαθήματος
- Ενίσχυση του ΣΦΚ σε επίπεδο προσωπικού, εξασφάλιση ελάχιστης πρόσβασης για κάθε φοιτητή ανά ακαδημαϊκό έτος, διασύνδεση με ακαδημαϊκά τμήματα και άλλους φορείς εντός και εκτός του Πανεπιστημίου, προγραμματισμός δραστηριοτήτων (π.χ. εργαστήρια - παρουσιάσεις - ομιλίες) στο πλαίσιο της ευαισθητοποίησης και προώθησης της ψυχικής υγείας, δημιουργία δυνατότητας πρακτικής άσκησης φοιτητών στο ΣΦΚ, παροχή συνεχιζόμενης εκπαίδευσης στο υπάρχον προσωπικό του ΣΦΚ, καθοδήγηση από ομοτίμους και εθελοντική δράση, συνεργασία με καθηγητές για ανταλλαγή ιδεών σύμφωνα με τις εμπειρίες τους
- Δυνατότητα επέκτασης της πρακτικής άσκησης και των δεξιοτήτων των φοιτητών σε διάφορους φορείς, αλλαγή του τρόπου λειτουργίας των ακαδημαϊκών επόπτων
- Εκτεταμένη εφαρμογή του προγράμματος "Γνωριμία μεταξύ μας" σε όλα τα τμήματα
- Ενεργός ρόλος του Μέντορα στο θεσμό της καθοδήγησης (ενημέρωση, κατάρτιση, εποπτεία)
- Εφαρμογή της εβδομάδας αποφοίτησης

Βασική Ιδέα

- **Το στρατηγικό σχέδιο θα πρέπει να λαμβάνει υπόψη την εκπαιδευτική διαδικασία των Ήπιων Δεξιοτήτων από την εγγραφή των φοιτητών στο UoC μέχρι την αποφοίτηση**

CASE 2: UNIVERSITY OF CYPRUS

BACKGROUND ANALYSIS

1. People

Organization chart – top people/persons of contact (names and affiliation/positions)

The University of Cyprus is a public corporate body. It is governed by the University Council, comprising both government appointed, and university elected members and the Senate where members are senior academic staff. The Faculties and Departments are administered by internal Boards; each Faculty is headed by an elected Dean; and each Department is headed by an elected Chairperson. The Rector's Council has executive competences concerning daily or current matters.

UCY Governing Bodies

The Council is responsible for the management and supervision of the administrative and financial affairs of the University and its property. The Council prepares the annual budget of the University for the financial year commencing on the first of January and ending on the 31st of December in each year and ratifies or promotions of the academic and administrative staff of the University.

The Senate is the highest academic body of the University and is responsible for the academic affairs of the University, both teaching and research.

The Rector's Council has executive competences concerning daily or current matters, granted by the Senate upon recommendation of the Rector, or the Council upon recommendation of the Chairman of the Council.

[source: https://www.ucy.ac.cy/GoverningBodies/en/general-information]

Fig.10presents the UCY administration organization chart.
[source: https://www.ucy.ac.cy/en/about/administration/ucy-administration]

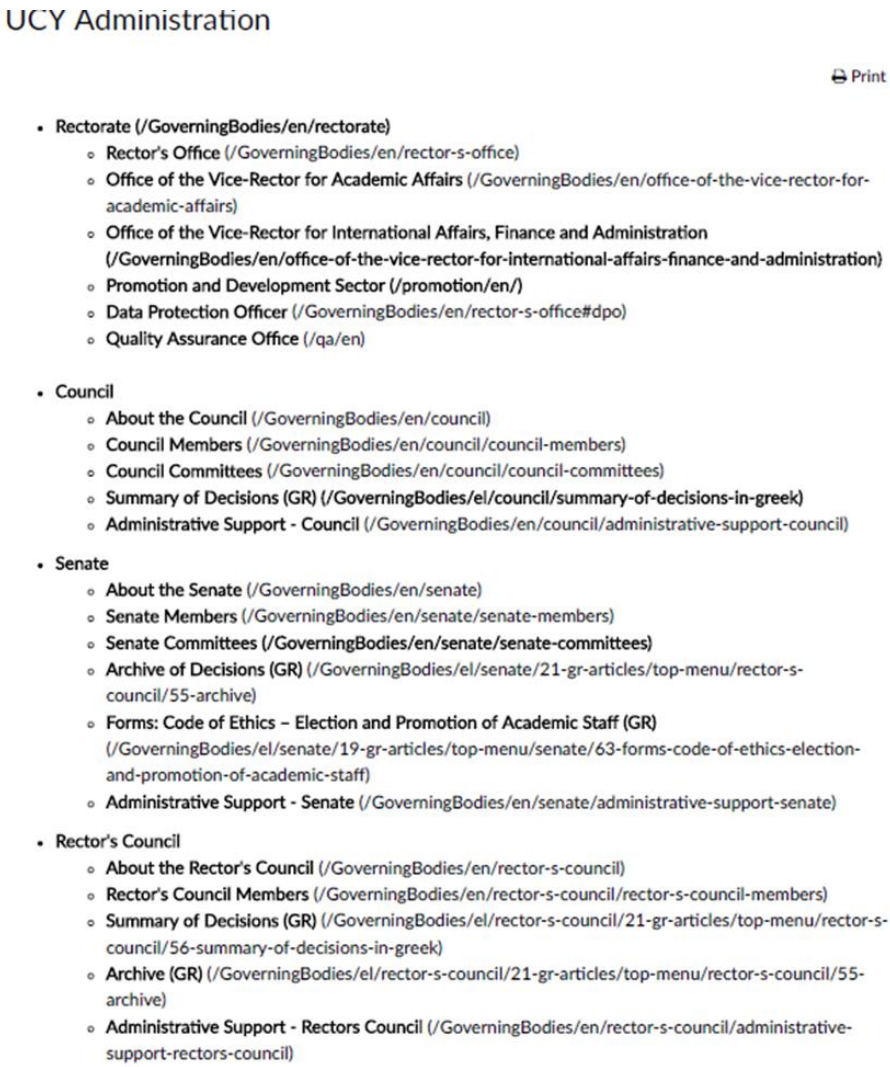


Figure 10

Key persons

Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs

The Office of the Vice Rector for Academic Affairs is responsible for promoting all issues related to the academic nature of the organization and mainly concern:

- Research and innovation
- the curricula
- the external evaluation of the University of Cyprus
- student issues

The Vice Rector for Academic Affairs Chairs the following Senate Committees: Research, Innovation, Undergraduate Studies, Library, and Student Life. The Committees are responsible for studying, designing, and promoting policies to the Senate to promote a high level of research and teaching. In addition, the committees make decisions on issues related to the proper functioning of the University, within the framework of the University Law of Rules and Regulations. In addition, the Vice Rector holds the position of Vice President of the Personnel Committee and participates in the Planning and Development Committee.

The Vice Rector for Academic Affairs is also the chairwoman of the Quality Assurance Committee of the university. UCY has endorsed the QA Policy in order to enrich the culture of continuous improvement, supporting the Programs of Study to be in line with the European Standard Guidelines 2015, meet academic standards and society's expectations.

The Office of the Vice Rector works closely with the central administrative services of the University, the Faculties and the Departments in matters concerning:

the financing of research activities
the announcement of internal research programs
the evaluation of curricula and the introduction of new ones
the announcement of scholarships for students or young researchers
determining the number of students admitted per academic year.
resolving issues faced by students during their studies
the authorized approval of student requests

In addition, the Office undertakes under the supervision and guidance of the Vice Rector the conduct of studies and the execution of the necessary actions for the implementation of the decisions of the collective bodies of the University.

[source: https://www.ucy.ac.cy/GoverningBodies/el/office-of-the-vice-rector-for-academic-affairs]

Dean of the Graduate School (GS)

The Graduate School (GS) was officially established in January 2012 at University of Cyprus. The department contributes significantly in the establishment and the promotion of the postgraduate studies at the University of Cyprus. The Graduate School coordinates the education, development and promotion of postgraduate programmes and also provides administrative support at the postgraduate programmes, ensuring the academic excellence and integrity. One of the objectives of the Graduate School is to ensure the quality of assurance and measures for the evaluation of the postgraduate programmes and of the degrees awarded by the University of Cyprus. The Graduate School also aims in the upgrade and strengthen of the postgraduate programmes of study and to improve the quality

support offered to the students and to the academic departments of the University. The programmes are still offered by the Academic Departments of University of Cyprus, without interfering in the operation and the academic work of the University's Departments.

The GS differs from the other departments as it does not consist of departments but of their postgraduate programmes. In the effort to strengthen the appearance and the contribution of the University of Cyprus, as a higher educational and research institution of the country, the university adopted and applied substantial policies and provides valid information.

[source: https://newdev.ucy.ac.cy/graduateschool/]

Administrative Services and Departments that may deliver intervention

UCY Administrative Services

Academic Affairs and Student Welfare Service (AASWS)

The UCY AASWS is responsible for supporting students in all issues relating to their studies, housing and student life, while providing personal and career. AASWS's goal is the creation of all the suitable conditions needed in order for all the students to achieve their academic goals and at the same time reach their full potential, while contributing to the formation of a vibrant and beneficial community in the University, as active world citizens.

Careers Centre

The UCY Career Centre aim to enhance the skills of students and alumni by providing a wide range of services designed to boost their

knowledge, increase their self-confidence and expand the range of their experiences. The Centre guides and supports students to discover, trust and develop their talents and creativity, as well as to enhance their self-awareness and self-confidence. The Career Centre offers services to students and alumni to develop skills, acquire work experience, network with employers, plan postgraduate studies and discover opportunities to boost their employability.

Centre for Teaching & Learning

The aim of Centre for Teaching and Learning is to support teaching and learning, so that these may correspond to modern needs and internationally compatible and competitive quality criteria. The Centre for Teaching and Learning in working towards the UCY policy for Quality Assurance in Teaching under Area I: Recognition and dissemination of good teaching practices and self-assessment of teaching in Action.

Its basic goals are a) The development of a policy on teaching, learning and evaluation at the undergraduate and graduate level; b) The support of Departments and academic staff on matters of development of Study Programmes; c) The support of Departments and academic staff on matters of planning, management and evaluation of teaching; d) The monitoring and upkeep of supporting infrastructure for teaching; e) The support of Departments and of all those involved in teaching, learning and production of teaching material; f) The development of mechanisms and of strategies for quality assurance in teaching; g) The development of study skills for all those involved in the learning process; h) The development of a system for the evaluation of teaching and the organization, management and safe keeping of data; i) The development of mechanisms for rewarding and disseminating "good practices" and quality teaching; j) The provision of brief workshops for UCY instructors and students; k) the promotion of the eLearning Policy of

the University of Cyprus; l) the promotion of innovative teaching practices (Teaching Innovations Call).

Teaching Innovations: The Centre for Teaching and Learning in working towards the UCY policy for Quality Assurance in Teaching under Area II: Initial training, ongoing faculty professional development, and networking in Action: B. Ongoing professional development for faculty and teaching staff, devises and announces calls for the implementation of innovative teaching interventions across all disciplines at UCY, Point no. 4: The Centre for Teaching and Learning devises and announces calls for the implementation of innovative teaching interventions across all disciplines at UCY.

Mental Health Center

The Mental Health Center role is to provide services that contribute to the personal development and well-being of students, so that they can have the best possible experience during their studies, but also to develop life-long skills useful after completing their studies, in the various personal and professional challenges they will face. The Mental Health Center offers a series of services such as individual and group-based counselling, therapy, assessment, and prevention, in order to help the UCY community to develop skills, knowledge and confidence to maximize social inclusion, active citizenship, health and employment.

Development and Alumni Relations Office

Among the main objectives of the University of Cyprus is the creation of a lifelong community of both graduates and other members of the university community, through the provision of information, services and opportunities for meaningful participation and engagement.

Mentor Programme

The Mentor Programme aims to guide about 200 University of Cyprus new alumni and students with the University annually in order to help them prepare for their careers. The programme is a three-month collaboration, during two possible periods, from October to December and January to March of each year, between new alumni and students or other members of the University community. Students may choose professionals who are willing to share their experiences and knowledge and who will advise them on developing their careers.

Programme mission: To facilitate an effective guidance relationship between experienced alumni (or other members of the University community) and new alumni and students, focussing on their professional and personal progress.

[Source: https://www.ucy.ac.cy/alumni/en/our-services/mentor-programme]

Life-long Learning

The University of Cyprus utilizes its scientific potential and infrastructure to offer high quality lifelong learning and education programmes that meet the needs of groups of citizens of the Cypriot society for training, education and specialization. In this context, the UCY provides its alumni, who are keen to expand their knowledge and achieve what's next, with many opportunities to participate in lifelong learning and training activities implemented annually. Whether you are looking to explore a new subject, pursue a lifelong passion or enhance your professional development, there's something for everyone.

[Source: https://www.ucy.ac.cy/alumni/en/our-services/life-long-learning]

UCY Academic Departments

Academic Advisors

All students graduate and undergraduate have an academic advisor who oversees their progress. Each student receives planning and academic advice from their Academic Advisor.

Relationship of HEI with outside stakeholders

UCY, as a part of its strategic planning, operates organisational entities such as Promotion and Development Section, the International Relations Service and the newly established Europe Direct UCY center that use tools and run processes to foster strategic partnerships and strong collaborations with universities, research institutions, and civil society nationally and worldwide.

In addition, the following offices and services are involved in building and maintaining strong partnerships with outside stakeholders.

Office of the Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs

The Office of the Vice Rector manages the communication with the Cyprus Agency of Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education (CYQAA) and the communication with state and social partners, such as the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Youth, the Parliament, Local Authorities, etc.

Career Centre

The UCY Career Centre has built a strong network of Relationships with business and public organizations to provide students with

hands-on experience. It comprises of the Career office and Laison Office

Career Centre provides:

- Employment and Placement Opportunities for students
- It organizes Career Fairs every spring semester at the University of Cyprus in which they host a large number of employers. Career Fairs include a range of activities such as Employers Exhibition, Career Academy, Mock Interviews / CV Clinic, Employment, Presentations and Discussions.
- It organizes "Meet the employers" Presentations, in which students have the opportunity to meet the employers and get information about the trends of the industry, the prospects and challenges, as well as placement or employment opportunities for students and graduates.
- It organizes “Open Days”, I which companies and organizations open their doors and host our students and alumni in their facilities, offering a unique experience of the real work environment.
- It organizes “On Campus Recruiting Events”, in which graduates and final year students of the University of Cyprus as well as employers are hosted on campus and conduct job interviews, in order to recruit talented candidates.

[source: https://www.ucy.ac.cy/careercentre/en/companies-organizations/networking-initiatives-with-students-alumni]

Laison Office:

The aim of the Liaison office is to develop and establish a structured network to provide the University’s academic and student community and the regional business sector a partnering platform, enabling both sides to explore effective mechanisms for the transferring of specialised know-how in terms of research, technology and innovation. Furthermore, the Office supports the

University's vision in enhancing students and graduates' employability and employment opportunities through a specific placement framework and through advising support services with an emphasis on soft skills, entrepreneurship and innovation.

Centre for Entrepreneurship

The mission of the Centre for Entrepreneurship of the University of Cyprus is threefold: a) to foster a culture of innovative entrepreneurship within the University and to develop relevant in-house expertise; b) to provide the entire University community with high-quality services and the connections required to bring scientific innovations and novel ideas produced inside the University to global marketplaces, and c) to contribute to the creation of a sustainable innovation ecosystem in Cyprus. C4E aspires to provide the training, expertise, mentorship, support and connections that UCY's students and young scientists need to become effective entrepreneurs.

To create synergies, to use available resources and expertise outside UCY, promoting the work and results of C4E in the Cypriot society, the surrounding countries, and the European Union. A key component of a university business ecosystem is the interface with the formed national entrepreneurial ecosystem and knowledge centers of excellence abroad. C4E seeks strategic cooperation with a small number of selected centers, which feature business accelerators (accelerators), pre-basic in investment funds and regularly organize business and innovation and promote entrepreneurship competitions. Furthermore, a key goal of networking is to promote the mobility of students and researchers to and from these centers for knowledge transfer, exchange of expertise and experiences, ultimately leading the fostering of human networks. Also, C4E will pursue networking and collaboration with stakeholders in Cyprus, such as companies and private-sector organizations, startups, auditing firms, voluntary bodies in innovation, other universities and

research centers, the Research Promotion Foundation, governmental departments, local authorities etc.

Students body

Student Union of the University of Cyprus

The Student Union of the University of Cyprus (FEPAN) was founded in 1993 and it is the organized trade union body of students at the University. Every student by enrolling in the University becomes a member of the Student Union acquiring the right to speak and participate in what concerns the Union. The representation of the students, the defense of their interests and the cooperation with the University Authorities are some of the main demands of the Student Union today. Members of the Student Union participate in all bodies of the University (University Council, Senate, Senate Committees, Department and School Boards). The executive body of the Union is the 21-member Board of Directors and is elected every March by its members.

Part 2. HEI – Strategy (long-term)

Vision and Mission

University of Cyprus aims to establish itself as a Pioneer Research Institution achieving International Scientific Recognition in European Higher Education, offering Competitive Programmes and to become a Centre of Excellence in the wider Euro - Mediterranean Region.

The main objectives of the University are twofold: the promotion of scholarship and education through teaching and research, and the enhancement of the cultural, social and economic development of Cyprus.

In this context, the University believes that education must provide more than simply accumulation of knowledge. It must also encourage students' active participation in the process of learning and acquisition of those values necessary for responsible involvement in the community. The University sets high standards for all branches of scholarship.

Research is promoted and funded in all departments for its contribution to scholarship in general and for its local and international applications.

[source: https://www.ucy.ac.cy/GoverningBodies/en/vision-and-mission]

Strategic plan

The Aims and Objectives of the Strategic Plan, coupled with the Action Plan, will
serve as a compass and road map, guiding UCY in its journey between 2021-2025
towards producing excellent outcomes and effectively handling any challenges.

The Strategic Objectives set are the outcome of the systematic analysis of the first four
years of implementation of the Strategic Plan 2016-2025, the feedback received from it
and the consultation sought both within the academic community and the external
stakeholders.
The main priorities of UCY for 2021-2025 are:
Introduction

1. Internationalization
2. Generate income
3. Recruit high-calibre academic staff

4. Attract students of high academic level
5. Develop hybrid and/or distant/remote forms of education
6. Accelerate infrastructure development

Strategic goals and operational objectives relevant to soft skills development

1. Strategic goal: Enhancing student and alumni employability
    a. Operational objectives:
        i. Ensure continuous upgrading of existing study programmes and introduce new ones in line with the expectations of the international labour market and the 'knowledge society'.
        ii. Enhance the language, critical thinking, and communication skills as well as the professional networking of students and alumni
    b. KPIs:
        i. Percentage of students who attended communication skills courses offered by the UCY Career Centre
        ii. Percentage of students and graduates who attended B2 level courses at the UCY Language Centre

Policies relevant to soft skills development

<u>UCY policy for Quality Assurance in Teaching</u>

[p.1]: "*The University of Cyprus, in promoting recognition of quality and excellence in teaching, has developed a policy for ensuring quality teaching at the Institution. Analytically, excellence in teaching and learning aims at:*
….. 3. Creating opportunities for real-world work experience in the context of pursuing
academic programs.

…. 5. Promoting critical thinking and student participation in university life".

[p.4] "*Area III:*
Mechanisms for support and continuous improvement
Actions:
…..
Support to improve students' quality of learning
This is accomplished as follows:
……
6. Promote the development of students' critical and creative thinking within the
context of the courses taught by engaging students in complex problem solving and by encouraging them to develop a critical stance toward learning
by exploring and evaluating multiple perspectives and solutions to a problem
based on criteria.
7. Provision of opportunities to students for taking general-education courses for
developing critical thinking skills, such as courses on logical reasoning.
….
12. Develop and improve students' transversal and other skills through seminars
offered by the Centre for Teaching and Learning and the Career's Office".

Part 3. HEI- Processes (short-term)

New Courses in the official curricula

All course outlines should be submitted to the Departmental Council for review and eventual approval by Senate.

1. An individual or team develops, a new course proposal and secures the departmental council's approval. New course proposals must include a syllabus. Upon review, the member serving as the lead for a specific course may contact the department chair or additional contact for clarifications and/or revisions until the course is ready for approval.
2. Once the course is approved at the department level, next step is to be approved by the Faculty Assembly.
3. If it is an undergraduate course: After the faculty's approval, the course proposal is reviewed for approval by the Undergraduate Studies Committee (senate Committee).
4. Final approval is needed from the Senate council.

Revision of existing course outline in the official curricula

An individual or team updates or revises course outline and secures course's supervisor and department chair approval.

Extracurricular Seminars/ workshops/brief courses

Careers centre: Careers centre hosts annually, the "Career Accelerator" Career Academy, an ongoing program of training seminars that helps students develop job market navigation skills (e.g. writing a resume, creating a Linked In profile, etc.) and enhance the required personal and professional skills (e.g. teamwork, communication, problem solving, presentation skills, etc.). Specialists and experts from the business sector are invited guests to be the trainers of these seminars.

Centre for Teaching and Learning (KE.DI.MA.): KE.DI.MA. organises short courses in topics that help students in their programme studies. The courses are organised every semester and cover topics that

students will find useful such as study skills, presentation skills, introducing Library services, introduction to specific software (e.g. SPSS) etc. These topics are not covered within the curriculum of the UCY programmes of study. All courses are completed in one day (maximum duration 6 hours). All courses are free to students and a certificate of attendance is awarded.

Procedure: Every semester KE.DI.MA. opens a call inviting all academic staff to express their interest in organizing and teaching short courses (for the next semester). Academic staff members who are interested in running such courses, fill an application form/ statement of interest and sent it to KE.DI.MA, within a pre-determined deadline. KE.DI.MA, reviews the applications and informs the successful candidates.

Mental Health Center: Every semester, the Mental Health Center offers a series of workshops for students to help them develop psycho-social/soft skills, to maximize their social inclusion, active citizenship, health and employment.

Procedure: Mental Health Center team members (staff and PhD clinical psychology interns) propose a series of workshops outlines and secures director's and center's council approval.

FOREGROUND ANALYSIS

Data collected through a semi-structured focus group were thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The group was comprised of six internal university representatives and one external stakeholder. In specific, the university members were: an academic member of the Senate, a head of a university admin service, an officer of a university resource, an academic staff and head of a university resource, an alumni representative and a student representative. The external stakeholder was a representative of the business sector. The

selection of participants was based on their relevance with soft skills development.

Thematic analysis identified four themes; namely, Setting the Scene, Creating a Multi-Faceted Training Program, The Need for Customisation and The Complexities of Evaluation. These themes were organised in the thematic map depicted in Fig.11. Dashed lines were used to depict the sub-themes sustaining each theme. The ways in which the data were organised points to three phases relating to the training program. The first phase focuses on preparing the ground for the creation and implementation of the training program (Setting the Scene). The second phase concerns the designing and implementation of the program (Creating a Multi-Faceted Training Program, The Need for Customisation) whereas the final phase is about its evaluation (The Complexities of Evaluation).

Q1. What are the key formats for soft skills training?

Theme 1: Setting the Scene

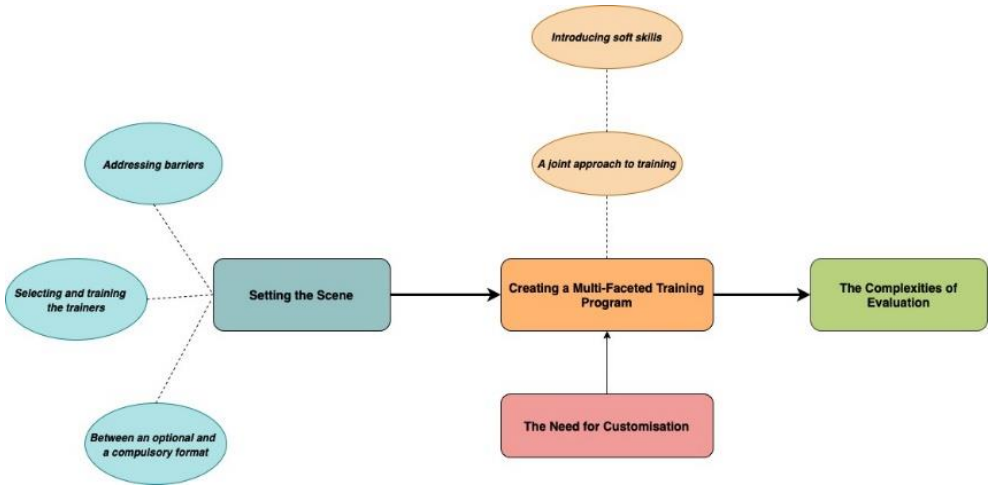


Figure 11

Setting the Scene was sustained by three sub-themes:

Addressing barriers, Selecting and training the trainers, Between an optional or a compulsory training. This theme captured participants' suggestions regarding preparatory actions that can be taken by the University of Cyprus (UCY) to facilitate the implementation of a soft skills training program.

Addressing barriers

Participants discussed several barriers impacting the implementation and effectiveness of soft skills training in HE, as well as possible ways of addressing them. Though all participants contributed, the discussion was mainly led by internal university representatives who drew from their experiences with current initiatives aiming to develop soft skills in HE. The most frequently mentioned barrier was the ineffective dissemination of information about available actions (e.g., events, trainings, seminars) to students. For example, some participants noted that they were at least partly unaware of the soft skills workshops organised by the Mental Health Center (MHC) of UCY:

Academic member of the Senate: The fact that the MHC offers this kind of courses should be more known to the [university] community and be known by everyone. I didn't even know about it. And I am sure the Career Centre didn't know about it either.

Student: We all need an academic advisor when we come to the university. Even though we have, we can't really come in contact with him to guide us, advise us. So [we] must have proper guidance. Because [we] do have advertisement. For instance, I am certain that the MHC, which I also didn't know about, advertises it, says that we are here, come [visit us] on that day. Why don't we see them though? We must have proper guidance, a person who can tell us "Look, on

this platform you can find all the activities happening at the University of Cyprus". And everyone, depending on the things they want and with proper guidance, orient themselves towards something.

In trying to explain why such information is not reaching its intended audience (i.e., students), participants talked about issues with the principal channel of communication used currently; namely, "mass emailing" (Academic staff and Head of a university resource). Participants suggested that students tend to not use their UCY email account and when they do, they "will open" (Student) emails sent from their "lecturers" (Student) but ignore all others.

Academic staff and Head of a university resource: […] mass emailing does not work.

Student: I agree.

Academic staff and Head of a university resource: First of all, they don't even check their UCY email. [At least] most students.

Student: Though the emails sent by some names from some offices at the university that we don't know are indeed a means of informing [students], 99.9% student[s] will not see them. There is no way [they will].

While social media outlets such as Facebook and Instagram were portrayed as a more effective channel of communication, concerns were raised about their efficacy in increasing a student's willingness to attend a training event. Instead, they were described as "a very good solution" (Student) for helping students "learn [about a service

but] not for using the service" (Student). The possibility of students not seeing relevant posts on social media due to being overloaded by the increased amount of information posted by the various university offices and faculties was also discussed as an additional barrier.

University resource officer: My understanding is that, umm, perhaps we need an over-simplification. This information has bombarded everyone. There are so many Instagram accounts even for the university. That is every entity, every office has its own [account]. It might be good for us that we are behind these offices because we feel like we handle it personally and possibly we post the information at the time we want, in the way we want, but I take a step back and think of the final user. […] Sometimes I loose the information, umm because there are all these accounts.

To address these communication barriers, one suggestion offered was to "over-simplify the transmission channel" (University resource officer) by limiting the number of accounts available and regulating who and when will post the information. The need for coordinated action and communication between the various university resources and offices involved in soft skills training, along with the recruitment of groups and individuals found at key positions for delivering the relevant information (e.g., Head of Department, student clubs, lecturers) were also raised:

Academic staff and Head of a university resource: On a second level we created a Facebook page. Anything that we post there and ask student clubs to share it, it immediately becomes easier [to reach students].

University resource officer: Many departments focus only on the academic part [of learning but] what we see from our side is that when there is a partnership between the Career Centre or the other entities that might offer similar [training] programmes and the members of the academic staff, students from those departments are more active. And I have tried it countless time where I sent information [to students] etc. and there is no response, but by calling five members of the academic staff and saying "Please say something about this initiative in your class", you immediately see participations from that department. So [students] rely on their academics and I view this, I consider it to be something positive and optimistic in helping us move to the next step.

Academic member of the Senate: And yes, we must first inform about what the MHC does, we must win [the people who are] Heads of Departments and academic advisors. Right? To be able through their departments, to promote it to their departments and to their students.

A second barrier discussed concerned practical restrictions affecting the format of the training, specifically, whether new modules for soft skills training could be offered. These restrictions included the inability to award additional ECTs for such new modules due to course accreditation restrictions. The alternative offered concerned the provision of such modules as electives.

Academic member of the Senate: Let me just mention the practical obstacle here. Programmes of studies cannot bring in any additional modules.

Researcher: Ok.

Academic member of the Senate: This then, we will have to start with this restriction. Ok? Currently most programmes of studies are already accredited and checked. In the sense that, umm, they don't have any superfluous ECTS to give to modules.

Head of a university admin service: Not even as electives I understand?

University resource officer: Yes, this is what I wanted to ask.

Academic member of the Senate: Umm as an elective yeah. As an elective it could [be done].

Lastly, "cultural issue[s]" (Academic staff and Head of a university resource, Head of a university admin service) such as the grade-driven mentality of Cypriot students were presented as barriers to soft skills training too, primarily because students do not comprehend why they should participate in such trainings. Participants noted that students view all activities "that are not awarded a grade as unimportant" (Academic staff and Head of a university resource) and do not consider "gaining a skill [as] rewarding" (Student). Though the use of incentives such as "certificates" (Alumni) and "ECTS" (Student, Alumni) was mentioned by some as a way of increasing student motivation, others expressed concerns that such tactics do not cultivate student "accountability" (External stakeholder) and "intrinsic motivation" (Academic staff and Head of a university resource). Thus, they can create a "vicious cycle" (Academic staff and Head of a university resource) where students engage in such trainings merely to gain an external reward. Alternatively, participants suggested to educate students about soft skills, to enable them to appreciate their usefulness. This introduction to soft skills was identified as an important preparatory step to training and is examined further under Creating a Multi-Faceted Training Program.

Selecting and training the trainers

Regarding who can deliver this training, participants mentioned various individuals with different roles and responsibilities. For example, lecturers were considered able to help students develop soft skills through their teaching practices, provided that were also trained beforehand and continued to participate in relevant trainings:

Academic member of the Senate: […] in their area of expertise, each lecturer at the level of tertiary education can do some things. They can judge which presentation is correct. However, they must be motivated to teach [their class] ways of presenting and how to be mindful of their audience. Because they also learnt [how to do it], through their Masters, Doctorate, by attending conferences […]. [T] is what the Centre of Teaching and Learning is for. In order to train us.

Employers were another group of possible trainers mentioned. Participants talked about the employers' role in extracurricular activities aiming to develop soft skills in HE (i.e., mentoring programmes, seminars, internships or placements) and explained that they could bring more "practical" (External stakeholder) aspects to this training:

University resource officer: I believe that the employer who is also the one who will conduct the interview, who will integrate [the student] in his/her team, can have a decisive role in mentoring.

External stakeholder: So where do we come in? To help you with this initiative that you are trying to do. And the things we do at our academy for instance, […] under the umbrella of our CSR, we do hundreds of trainings internally to clients, on a thousand different topics. All this knowledge, which is very practical because it has to do

with, umm, the challenges we see everyday in a very demanding work setting, umm, it is much easier if we come in to bring this knowledge, so that people can adapt to this environment more easily.

Alumni and advanced students (e.g., senior undergraduates, postgraduates) were also deemed important for soft skills training, specifically in the role of mentors. However, this role was not considered suitable for any student or alumni, hence the need for a careful selection process was expressed:

Academic staff and Head of a university resource: We might have 28 thousand [graduates] but how we will choose the people who will become mentor[s] is very important. Because many times, the people who have entered the world [the participant is referring to the employment sector] and are disappointed because /of their choices/, they can convey very negative images and inaccurate images regarding what is really happening out there.

External stakeholder: /Yes./

Alumni: /Correct. Correct, yes./ We will have definitely have [to] train the trainers, for sure.

Academic staff and Head of a university resource: It is also a matter of selection before they move to the training.

Alumni: Correct.

University resource officer: Yes.

Academic member of the Senate: Who will go for training.

Academic staff and Head of a university resource: Who will go.

Head of a university admin service: Yes, true, true.

Academic staff and Head of a university resource: It's not about as simple as opening a call and any interested, can come [be a mentor].

Between an optional and a compulsory format

Deciding on whether soft skills training should be part of the formal requirements of a course (i.e., compulsory) or optional, was a topic that sparked ambivalence. Participants expressed conflicting views, with some supporting that making this training compulsory -at least at an introductory level- would ensure students have a basic understanding and experience with soft skills. As a result, this could help students appreciate their value, motivating them to develop them further. Others argued making the training compulsory would deny agency and personal choice, thus placing students in a passive role. The following extracts exemplify this ambivalence.

Alumni: At this time, with our culture and the way we think about this subject, I think we should find a way to make it compulsory. […] In order to encourage you, to put you on the path, and then you [can] understand its value and put in the hours.

External stakeholder: […] I think that not everything must be compulsory because we want to create people who are independent. We want to have people that take ownership of what they want and who they want to be.

Academic staff and Head of a university resource: I agree that ideally it cannot be compulsory because ultimately, you reinforce and continue this vicious cycle where to do something I need to get that certificate so I can prove this and that. Umm, at the end of the day you don't develop any internal motivation to continue to do something.

Student: I am also troubled about whether you should tell a student "You know, you will now be doing this because it's for your own good".

Theme 2: Creating a Multi-Faceted Training Program

Creating a Multi-Faceted Training Program was sustained by two sub-themes. These reflected the participants' suggestions for introducing students to soft skills and for designing a training program that enables them to develop these skills as part of their taught modules but also beyond them.

Introducing soft skills

Participants discussed the importance of educating students about the function of soft skills and ways of developing them. This introduction was portrayed as the first stage of training, almost like a preparatory step. Hence, they believed that it should be delivered at the beginning of a student's "journey" (University resource officer, External stakeholder, Alumni) in HE. This introduction was described as essential for all students since being unaware of their significance, is one of the reasons why students do not engage in soft skills training in the first place:

Student: Possibly at the start of the year, and by start of the year I mean from the first year, from the first day of university, we should have proper guidance about what we mean by skills, how important skills are. We come to the university not knowing that in four years we will need them. We don't know that after four years when we graduate and we will have to apply to postgraduate [programmes], apply for jobs, these [skills] might be even more important than our grade. Thus, there must be very good guidance for the student [in order to] first learn why this is important.

External stakeholder: We need to explain to them from the start what it means and how important it is to have these skills, and from there one, if they don't bother to do the actions they should in order to create a better self, then it is their issue. Because we need to create accountability.

A joint approach to training

According to participants, a soft skills training program should incorporate various components, enabling skill development both within and outside the classroom setting (i.e., taught modules). Further, it should be implemented from the beginning until the end of a student's studies, or as participants put it, from "day one" (Head of a university admin service) until graduation.

Starting with classroom-based interventions, participants discussed the need for upgrading existing modules to facilitate soft skills development. Specifically, they suggested the use of newer teaching and assessment methods that promote the students' "active" (Academic member of the Senate, Academic staff and Head of a university resource, External stakeholder, Alumni) involvement. Examples included "tutorials" (Academic staff and Head of a university resource), case-based or problem-based "simulations" (External stakeholder), "presentations" (Academic staff and Head of a university resource, University resource officer) and group assignments:

Academic member of the Senate: […] within existing modules, depending on the skill and the nature of the module, it should be part, some of the [module] goals should be towards those directions [of soft skill development]. But it could also be done [through] separate programmes, seminars, but not seminars. I would see it more as case-based simulations, problem-based practice kind of things where participation could also be through a mobile phone. They [should also] include umm [things like] working in pairs, have a debate, evaluate each other's arguments, critical thinking, okay? Or to

differentiate what we consider to be fake new and what we consider to be valid new in a text we are reading.

To successfully move away from "traditional" (Academic member of the Senate) teaching methods, participants noted that "first we must win the [support of the] academic staff, the lecturers" (Academic member of the Senate), but also, a broader, coordinated, university-level initiative is required:

Researcher: Is there any room for upgrading existing modules? Kind of what we were discussing before, incorporating these skills /in existing [modules]/.

Academic member of the Senate: /Yes./ There is but it needs a coordinate effort, universal to the University of Cyprus. This is something that should be done by the Careers Centre along with the Centre for Teaching and Learning and the contribution of the Vice Rector of Academic Affairs, and of course the Academic Affairs and Student Welfare Service. And a much more coordinate effort must be done.

This universal approach was portrayed as a way to facilitate a change in the "mentality" (Academic staff and Head of a university resource) of academic staff members, who tend to prioritise research over teaching, hence they utilise more "traditional" (Academic member of the Senate) methods of teaching and do not invest time in developing their teaching skills via attending relevant trainings.

Academic staff and Head of a university resource: […] I don't remember who organised them - if it was the Centre for Teaching and Learning or someone else at the university. Two-day trainings for

new methods of learning, teaching, etc. used to be organised. I want to three [trainings]. We were barely ten people [there]. It was shocking for me. And most of them were not even Administrative or Research Staff members [the participant is referring to permanent faculty members]. […]. So I think that as part of this broader initiative mentioned by the Academic member of the Senate, something must be done so that we can change the mentality that we as staff members have, and change our teaching methods.

Another classroom-based suggestion was the creation of new modules focusing explicitly on soft skills. Regarding the format of these modules, participants talked about similar teaching methods to the ones described above (i.e., tutorials, case-based simulations, problem-based simulations), as well as the potential use of technology (e.g., VR apparatus). As for their content, it was not examined in detail. One thing mentioned was that such modules could be a way of introducing students to soft skills. Due to the accreditation restrictions noted above, offering these modules as electives was presented as the best option:

Academic staff and Head of a university resource: As we were talking, I was thinking that one way this could be done is by creating a module. And when I was talking with a Turkish colleague of mine in the past, she told me that at her university in Istanbul, they have a compulsory module for students in the first semester, that is precisely for these skills [to help them] later on. And it's compulsory and she was teaching it herself. If it can be offered as an elective, it's a good start.

Participants noted that classroom-based interventions must be accompanied by ones that help students develop their skills outside the classroom too. They talked about various types of extracurricular

activities organised by different university resources (i.e., Mental Health Center, Careers Centre, Academic Affairs and Student Welfare Service, Centre for Teaching and Learning, Centre for Entrepreneurship) including workshops, seminars, internships and Erasmus placements. Employers were viewed as critical for this part of the training, both in conducting parts of the training (e.g., offer a seminar or a workshop) and in offering opportunities that can help students develop these skills (e.g., placements, internships).

University resource officer: In my opinion, skill development can occur through various ways and different routes. I believe that it is not just one route. So [for example] only through seminars or only through extracurricular activities etc. I believe it is a combination of ways and methods that can be implemented throughout a student's journey at the university. This might mean during taught modules, through methodologies and ways that can be developed within the scope of taught modules, but also beyond them. […] [B]eyond the [interventions relating to] taught modules, beyond the training and personalised coaching, I also add another thing: all that pool of activities that help students [develop these skills] experientially. These include placements for working experience, Erasmus mobility, participations in competitions abroad.

Mentorship programmes guiding students in how they can develop their skills, informing them about available opportunities for skill development, providing feedback about their progress and supporting them throughout their journey in HE, were presented as a key aspect of a soft skills training program.

Academic staff and Head of a university resource: […] you have a mentor, who can be an advanced student or someone who is about to graduate, for example he can be a third year [student] and you can be

a first year [student], or a postgraduate student and so forth, who can help guide you through your weakness.

University resource officer: I think that the role of the mentor is very important in [the student's] evaluation, his/her interim evaluation, overall evaluation and so forth. I believe that the mentor is the one who will sit with the student and review his/her self-assessment. In the meantime, [the mentor] may observe the student during, umm, how the student behaves during a lecture, how he/she responds when participating in different activities. And [the mentor] will come back to offer [the student] his/her plan for development, to discuss with him/her points [in need] of development and offer suggestions as to how this development will come about.

Student: For students to use a service, they must be told by a mentor to do so, and when I talked about guidance before, this is what I meant. To have someone who will tell you that you need to do these things. […] To [help] the student have a view of the things he/she must do in the year [to develop] these [skills] and be guided by a mentor.

Another important point raised about the format of the training program was that it should be "known" (Alumni) to students from the start of their journey. As can be seen in the student's extract cited above, being aware beforehand of the actions students can or must complete to develop their skills, depending on whether the training will be compulsory or optional, could help them be better prepared. As for the most appropriate mode of delivery, participants stressed the significance of using a combination of in-vivo and remote/virtual training.

Alumni: I agree with the matter of variety and the need to use a combination of methods to approach the subject. From in-vivo to umm, I think, it's my opinion, to remote [learning]. Basically, a combination, which will give the opportunity for some of the actions to be completed in a [timeframe] that you have to meet, you have to dedicate time, you have to come to a specific place, but at the same time it is accompanied from a part that you must complete in your own time, umm, remotely.

Q2. Should the format of the training be differentiated in any way?

Theme 3: The Need for Customisation

The Need for Customisation captured the participants' suggestions for a customisable training program, whose format could be adapted based on the skill trained, the discipline and the needs of each student. Though participants considered the broader aspects of the training (i.e., an introduction to soft skills and a combination of interventions within and outside the classroom) as things that should be the same for all students regardless of their discipline, the mode of delivery (i.e., in-vivo, virtual) and methods used (e.g., seminars, tutorials, virtual training, presentations, etc.) were seen as things that should be customised. For example, below, the importance of adapting the training methods used and to some extent the content of the training program to the particularities of different disciplines is raised:

Academic staff and Head of a university resource: Because we are mostly talking about business, the reality is that only a portion of our students will end up there. The same [applies] to other courses too. Thus, we cannot focus only on the business discipline. […] [W]e will have to see how these things can be customis[ed] to every discipline.

Employer: Right.

University resource officer: We agree.

Academic staff and Head of a university resource: It's difficult to, umm. We draw from the business discipline because it's there that [these skills] have developed the most, especially in the last years, and this is the reality. But if something is going to be implemented, whether it's mentoring, whether it's trainings, whether it's anything, we will have to consider the particularities of each discipline and the employability [prospects] of these disciplines.

The need for skill-based customisation was noted too. Participants described that some training methods and modes of delivery may be better suited for some skills and not others. Hence, choosing the best method for the skill trained was portrayed as crucial:

External stakeholder: I also agree with what has been said and [I] just want to add that it depends on what specific skill we are talking about. It plays a very big role because there are some skills that need more active, umm, [for the training] to not be remote anyhow. And there are other things that it might be okay to do [remotely] and accompany them with something else, in my opinion.

A final type of customisation addressed was the need for a personalised approach. Though not many details were offered regarding how this personalisation can be achieved, some participants mentioned that the content of the training should be adapted to the needs and preferences of each student. Examples of this are provided below.

External stakeholder: […] everything starts from identifying what you need, from your self-awareness. Hence, at least what we do, we have assessments, which could be assessment centres or psychometric

tests or different types of assessments that we do at the beginning, [so that] everyone can first realise where he/she to focus. Because we are all different, with very different skills and we have some things that are a bit more innate for us. So umm, it's good to have a personalised training for, umm, [I refer to] the training in general including its different components. So we know precisely for a person that we will give more emphasis on something specific, [whereas] for someone else [we will focus] on something else.

Student: We must have proper guidance, a person who can tell us "Look, on this platform you can find all the activities happening at the University of Cyprus". And everyone, depending on the things they want and with proper guidance, orient themselves towards something.

Q3. How can we evaluate the efficacy of the training?

Theme 4: The Complexities of Evaluation

The Complexities of Evaluation reflected the participants' ideas regarding when and how the training program could be evaluated. In trying to describe how to evaluate the training program, participants talked about different aspects guiding the format of the evaluation. Firstly, they described various methods for assessing whether a student has developed his/her soft skills. These included psychometric tests, questionnaires, open-ended questions, multiple choice questions and observations. As they explained, the exact method of evaluation can only be dictated by the skill one wants to assess and, in some instances, assessing a skill through a combination of methods might be preferred.

Academic member of the Senate: As for the evaluation of these modules or these activities or when [soft skills] are added as a learning goal in modules, the evaluation cannot be the typical

evaluation we know. It can even be multiple choice. The type of the assessment doesn't matter. What matters is what you ask. So if you ask something that you haven't given [to students] and it requires deductive reasoning, critical thinking, it requires that the individual takes four five things he/she learnt in class and combine them to build an answer, then this is the soft skill, primarily a cognition skill.

Researcher: What kind of assessment?

External stakeholder: Well, it can be many things. We will have to decide what are these, umm, these skills. But it could be an assessment centre that has simulations, to be able to record things about each one using observers, to combine it with psychometric [tests]. It might not be a single thing. [It might be] a combination of things to assess that thing.

University resource officer: I want to go back to what the Employer said about defining the skills [we are interested in] so that once we have defined them, we can decide what types of assessment [we will use].

Beyond the use of varied assessments methods, the Academic staff and Head of a university resource also talked about the usefulness of a multi-level evaluation. The participant explained that adding elements of peer evaluation and self evaluation can help students develop the ability to identify strengths and weaknesses in themselves. Hence, they can use this information for further development. As for how this peer and self evaluation can be performed, the participant suggested that similar methods of assessments to the ones mentioned above can be used.

Academic staff and Head of a university resource: […] I have adopted the aspect of, of self-assessment and peer feedback. Okay? So it's three levels of assessment that must be done because [students] also need to learn to assess themselves. It's not only (inaudible) but to be able to acquire this as a skill in the long run, and use it later on. Umm, once again, you can do this with open-ended questions depending on the skill etc., or with Likert type scale ranging from 1 until 5 and give them the specific sub-categories of the skill and ask them to self-assess and then to also give you some qualitative comments on which you will provide feedback.

One aspect that seemed to puzzle participants the most was whether evaluation should have a formal (i.e., graded) or informal (i.e., not graded) nature. As seen below, some expressed the belief that students should be graded based on their performance. Others believed that students should be able to choose whether to develop these skills and to what extent, hence they should not be formally assessed.

External stakeholder: My opinion is that if we are going to make something that will be compulsory, inserting it in taught modules is very nice and it's crucial. […] I think that not everything must be compulsory because we want to create people who are independent. We want to have people that take ownership of what they want and who they want to be. We need to explain to them from the start what it means and how important it is to have these skills, and from there one, if they don't bother to do the actions they should in order to create a better self, then it is their issue.

Alumni: If we look at compulsory, because it was something that I mentioned too, compulsory doesn't necessarily mean grade. It can be pass or fail.

Academic staff and Head of a university resource: This is not the point. […] You want to create intrinsic motive. To not continued to [do things] only for the grade.

Some even wondered about the function of the evaluation and what will happen in cases where a student has not developed a skill.

University resource officer: The purpose is not the assessment but helping this person to develop.

External stakeholder: The thing is that in a class, you can spot if someone doesn't have that skill. But what happens after that? For example, I spot[ted] that [External stakeholder's name] is not good at critical thinking and can't solve some of the issues were are discussing. Then? What happens?

Lastly, in terms of when the program should be evaluated, participants supported multiple evaluations throughout a student's training are needed. The first point of evaluation should occur before the training program is implemented to acquire baseline measures regarding the students' level of skills. Interim assessments (i.e., at different point during the implementation of the training program) were described as important in assessing the students' progress and identifying areas in need of improved. Once the training is completed, participants supported that a final assessment is needed in order to compare pre and post measures and identify whether the training program was effective or not.

University resource officer: […] it is important to have types of formative evaluations. Those [evaluations] that will observe the student and his/her development, his/her progress, so that they can provide feedback for improvement. […] And [there must also be] some summative [evaluations] towards the end [of the student's studies] to see the final result.

External stakeholder: Firstly, there must be an assessment before [the implementation of the training] to be able to do an assessment after to see the difference between the two.

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ROADMAP

On September 8th, 2022, we held a live co-creation workshop with a group of regional experts to clarify the relevance and implementation of the conclusions drawn from background and foreground analysis. The expert group's objective was to come to an agreement on a shortlist of implementation indicators for the creation of a roadmap for a tiered system of soft skill training in the institution.

Participants

We used a snowball sampling approach to recruit participants for the co-creation workshop. First, we identified potential participants from the university (university heads and administrators, student welfare officers, student representatives) and from UCY's professional

connection with external stakeholders (e.g. employers, government officials). Second, we contacted the list of potential participants who were eligible to participate, to examine their interest in participation. We established an expert group (N=9) comprised of 5 university officers, 1 academic staff/university head, 1 student, and 2 representatives from government public agencies.

Co-creation workshop

The expert group convened for 3.5 hours. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss potential frameworks, process models, and indicators related to implementation and scale-up of a multilevel system for soft skills training in the university. Activities spanned presentations and interactive group co-design activities.

During the main activity of the workshop exercise, the expert group was provided a brief description of the present status, barriers, facilitators regarding two main areas: a) ***Soft skills development as a part of the official curriculum***, and b) ***Soft skills development as part of the student's journey*** (extracurricular activities, placements etc.).

Then they were asked to exchange views on frameworks, process models, and indicators and place them in rank order, based on **impact and difficulty matrix**. The purpose was to identify and reach consensus on a core set of implementation indicators and place them on a timeline (immediate, short-term and long-term), based on their feasibility and applicability.

Results-Roadmap development

The indicators were placed on an implementation roadmap consisted of three timeframes: immediate, short-term and long-term (fig. 12-15). Indicators were placed in one of these timeframes after being evaluated on several factors such as adherence, appropriateness, cost, effectiveness, and fidelity.

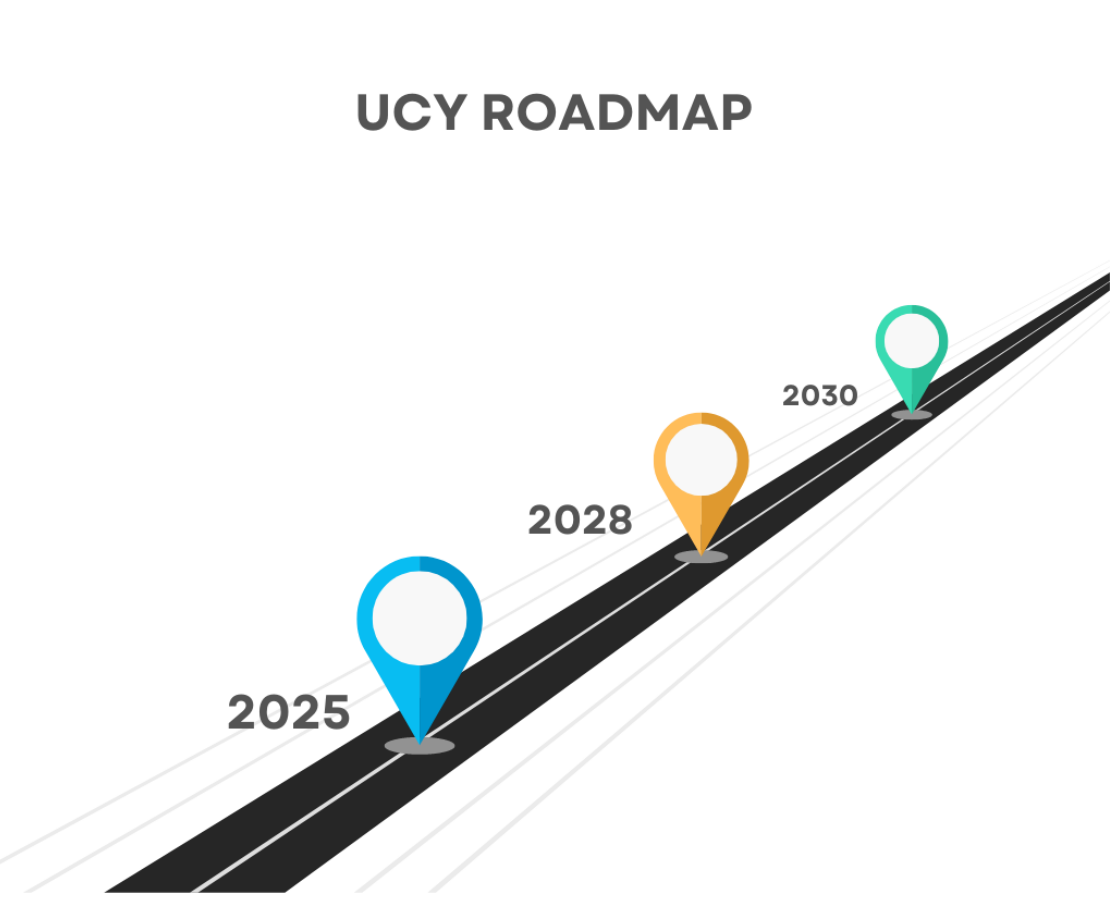


Figure 12

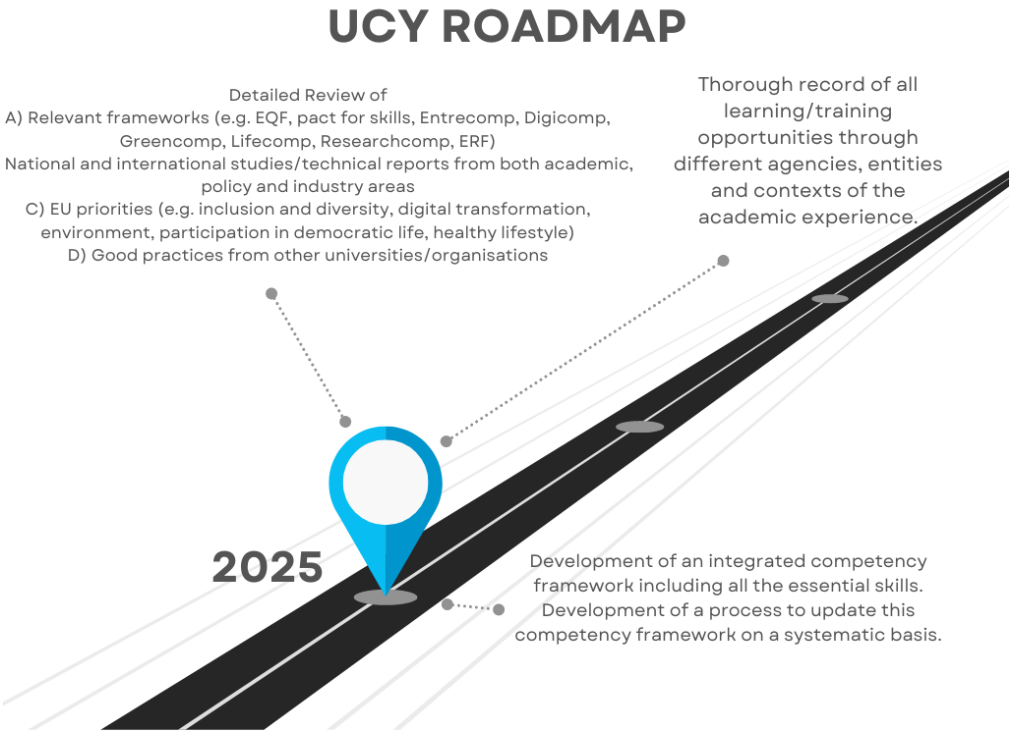

UCY ROADMAP
Detailed Review of
A) Relevant frameworks (e.g. EQF, pact for skills, Entrecomp, Digicomp, Greencomp, Lifecomp, Researchcomp, ERF)
National and international studies/technical reports from both academic, policy and industry areas
C) EU priorities (e.g. inclusion and diversity, digital transformation, environment, participation in democratic life, healthy lifestyle)
D) Good practices from other universities/organisations
Thorough record of all learning/training opportunities through different agencies, entities and contexts of the academic experience.
2025
Development of an integrated competency framework including all the essential skills.
Development of a process to update this competency framework on a systematic basis.

Figure 13

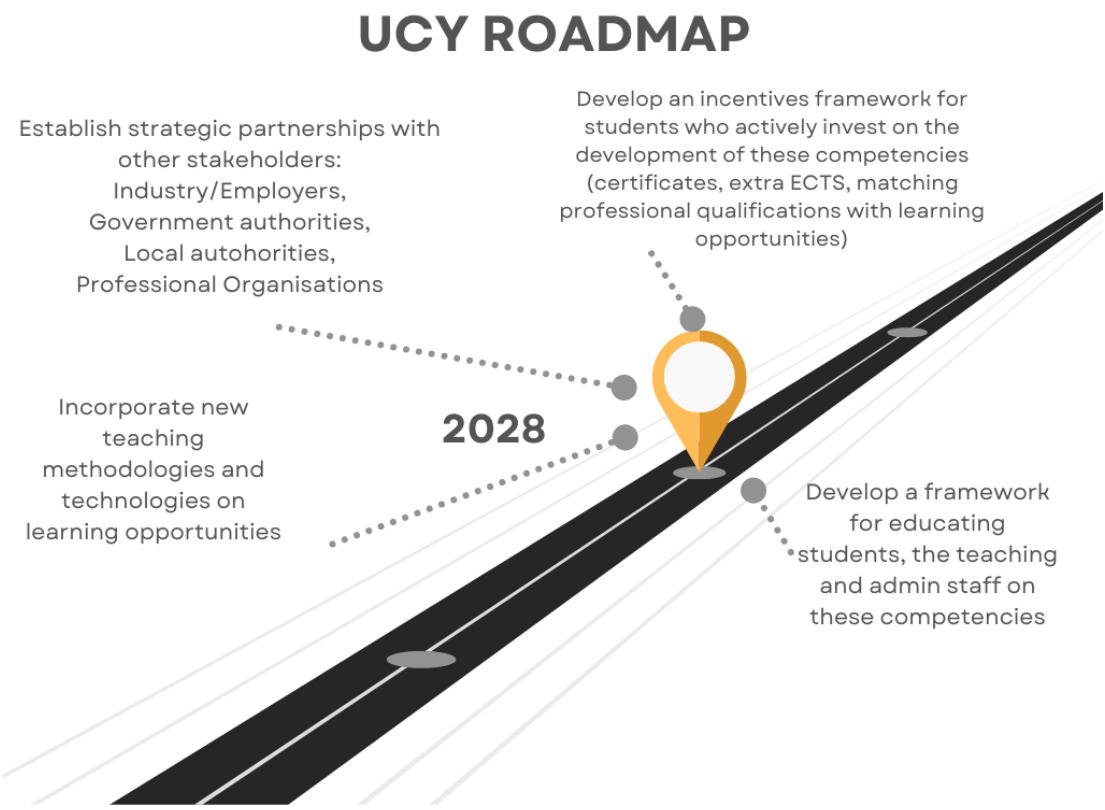

UCY ROADMAP
Establish strategic partnerships with other stakeholders: Industry/Employers, Government authorities, Local autohorities, Professional Organisations
Develop an incentives framework for students who actively invest on the development of these competencies (certificates, extra ECTS, matching professional qualifications with learning opportunities)
Incorporate new teaching methodologies and technologies on learning opportunities
2028
Develop a framework for educating students, the teaching and admin staff on these competencies

Figure 14

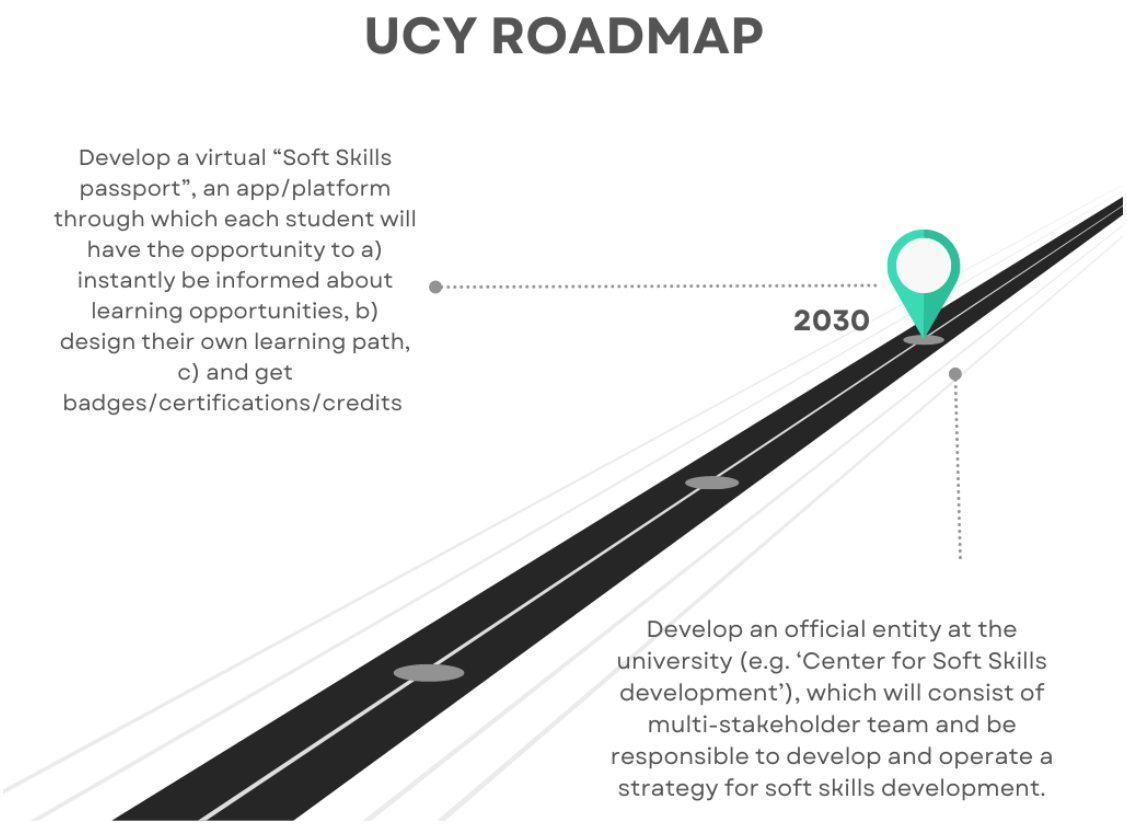

UCY ROADMAP
Develop a virtual "Soft Skills passport", an app/platform through which each student will have the opportunity to a) instantly be informed about learning opportunities, b) design their own learning path, c) and get badges/certifications/credits
2030
Develop an official entity at the university (e.g. 'Center for Soft Skills development'), which will consist of multi-stakeholder team and be responsible to develop and operate a strategy for soft skills development.

Figure 15

Figure 16

Οδικός Χάρτης Παν. Κύπρου
Λεπτομερής Ανασκόπηση
Α) Σχετικά πλαίσια (π.χ. EQF, pact for skills, Entrecomp, Digicomp, Greencomp, Lifecomp, Researchcomp, ERF)
Β) Εθνικές και διεθνείς μελέτες/τεχνικές εκθέσεις τόσο από ακαδημαϊκούς όσο και από τομείς πολιτικής και βιομηχανίας
Γ) Προτεραιότητες της ΕΕ (π.χ. ένταξη και ποικιλομορφία, ψηφιακός μετασχηματισμός, περιβάλλον, συμμετοχή στη δημοκρατική ζωή, υγιής τρόπος ζωής)
Δ) Καλές πρακτικές από άλλα πανεπιστήμια/οργανισμούς
Ενδελεχής καταγραφή όλων των ευκαιριών μάθησης/κατάρτισης μέσω διαφορετικών φορέων, οντοτήτων και πλαισίων της ακαδημαϊκής εμπειρίας.
2025
Ανάπτυξη ενός ολοκληρωμένου πλαισίου που περιλαμβάνει όλες τις βασικές δεξιότητες.
Ανάπτυξη μιας διαδικασίας για την ενημέρωση αυτού του πλαισίου σε συστηματική βάση.

Figure 17

Οδικός Χάρτης Παν. Κύπρου
Δημιουργία στρατηγικών συνεργασιών με άλλα ενδιαφερόμενα μέρη: Βιομηχανία/Εργοδότες, Κυβερνητικές αρχές, Τοπικές αυτοδιοικήσεις, Επαγγελματικές Οργανώσεις
Ανάπτυξη ενός πλαισίου κινήτρων για φοιτητές/ριες που επενδύουν ενεργά στην ανάπτυξη αυτών των δεξιοτήτων (πιστοποιητικά, επιπλέον ECTS, αντιστοίχιση επαγγελματικών προσόντων με ευκαιρίες μάθησης)
Ενσωμάτωση νέων μεθοδολογιών και τεχνολογιών διδασκαλίας σχετικά με τις ευκαιρίες μάθησης
2028
Ανάπτυξη ενός πλαισίου για την εκπαίδευση των φοιτητών/ριών, του διδακτικού και του διοικητικού προσωπικού σε αυτές τις δεξιότητες

Figure 18

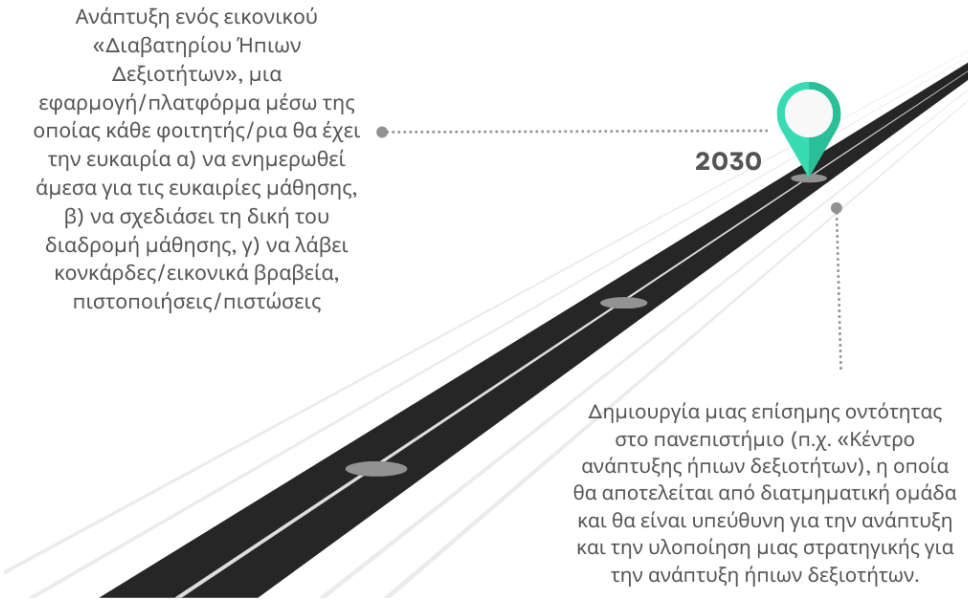

Οδικός Χάρτης Παν. Κύπρου
Ανάπτυξη ενός εικονικού «Διαβατηρίου Ήπιων Δεξιοτήτων», μια εφαρμογή/πλατφόρμα μέσω της οποίας κάθε φοιτητής/ρια θα έχει την ευκαιρία α) να ενημερωθεί άμεσα για τις ευκαιρίες μάθησης, β) να σχεδιάσει τη δική του διαδρομή μάθησης, γ) να λάβει κονκάρδες/εικονικά βραβεία, πιστοποιήσεις/πιστώσεις
2030
Δημιουργία μιας επίσημης οντότητας στο πανεπιστήμιο (π.χ. «Κέντρο ανάπτυξης ήπιων δεξιοτήτων), η οποία θα αποτελείται από διατμηματική ομάδα και θα είναι υπεύθυνη για την ανάπτυξη και την υλοποίηση μιας στρατηγικής για την ανάπτυξη ήπιων δεξιοτήτων.

Figure 19

CASE 3: VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT AMSTERDAM

BACKGROUND ANALYSIS

Part 1. People

1.1 The VU organization structure is as follows:

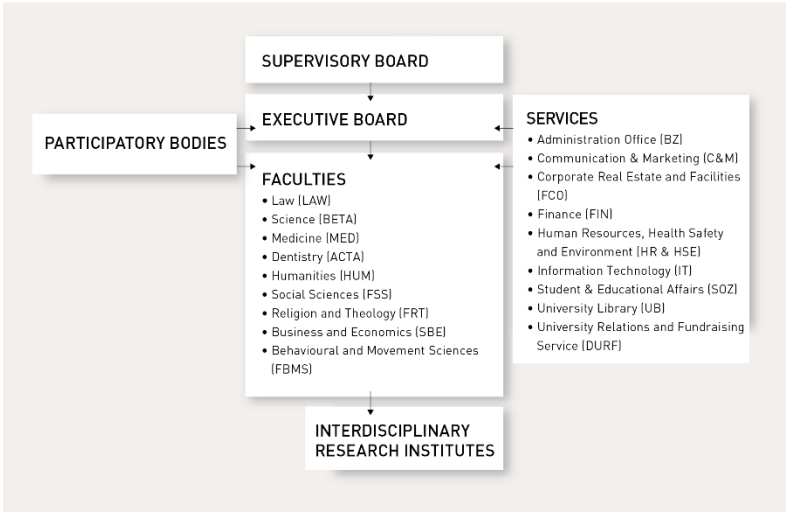


Figure 20

Each faculty has its own faculty board. For the Science Faculty (BETA), the top of the organization chart is as follows, under which the various departments are structured:

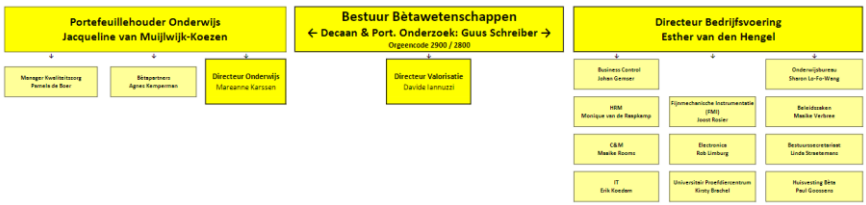


Figure 21

1.2 Departments that can contribute to the education of transversal skills are Student & Educational affairs services. Part of these services are, for example, the student (psychological) counsellors and the student wellbeing office. Furthermore, each faculty has their supporting educational personnel, consisting of lecturers and university lecturers. The education in each department is overseen by an education board, two program directors and two program coordinators (one for the Bachelor and one for the Master program). The program director and coordinator of the Bachelor program lead a team of junior lecturers. Also career services/internship offices are also organized per faculty (but are not present for all faculties).

1.3 The VU University Relations and Fundraising Services (DURF) is the central point for the relationship with stakeholders. This department organizes university wide events based on the four VU profile themes, which include: Human Health and Life Sciences, Science for Sustainability, Connected World and Governance for Society. During these events, VU initiatives are connected to both internal and external stakeholders.

Alongside this, the VU has its own multidisciplinary research institute, the Athena Institute, for

analyzing and integrating diverse stakeholder perspectives and studying and designing science-society interfaces. The Athena Institute has developed the Stakeholder Engagement in Education and Research (StEER) Toolbox to support the VU Amsterdam's strategy to engage staff and students with the society as a whole.

1.4 As part of the Student & Educational affairs services, transversal skills might be taught by student psychologists and people of the student wellbeing office and the career office. Within each faculty, each department has a team of junior lecturers, that, in addition to supporting first year courses, take on personal tutoring and teaching of academic skills, under supervision of lecturers and university lecturers, who may also integrate transversal skills in their courses.

1.5 The University Student Council (USR) is the Participation Council of and for the students of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Furthermore, each faculty has a Faculty Student Council (FSR), which is the highest student participation body within their faculty.

Part 2. HEI – Strategy (long-term)

2.1 Mission statement

The VU mission mentions transversal skills to profile students and staff as 'free thinkers', compassionate, with 'A Broader Mind'.

"Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam takes responsibility for people and the planet by delivering values-driven education, research and knowledge transfer. We help students and professionals develop expertise and A Broader Mind. Research at VU Amsterdam is groundbreaking, both within and across disciplines. As free thinkers with a focus on diversity, purpose and compassion, our

students and staff have a deep connection with one another while being fully engaged with society as a whole. This is VU Amsterdam's mission."

"The basic philosophy of VU Amsterdam is expressed in our three core values—responsible, open and personally engaged—which serve as guidelines for the work and behaviour of our employees and students. These values are inextricably linked to the way in which we give shape to our excellent research and education. Those who are part of the VU community endorse these values."

2.2 Vision (link) and strategic plan (https://issuu.com/vuuniversity/docs/vu_instellingsplan-nl)

The VU vision statement and its strategic plan incorporate transversal skills in various ways, for example:

- "In education we pay attention to the personal development of our students.

- Students develop 'a broader mind', because we invite them to think about who they are, how they look at the world and their role in society, and how they relate to others.

- The mission of the VU answers the question of why we teach: to improve the world by training students to become responsible, critical and committed academics who want to continuously develop themselves. We not only teach our students high-quality knowledge, but also a broad view, A Broader Mind. In education we pay attention to the personal development, academic broadening and social orientation of our students.

- The VU helps students, PhD students, scientists and professionals – both within and outside the VU – to grow into people with A Broader Mind. These are people who:

• are aware of their own personality, motivations and frame of mind and being open to those of others at the same time

• are able to combine in-depth professional knowledge with a broad multidisciplinary view and skills

• be able to think critically and from different perspectives

• being able to look, think and work across borders

• contribute as committed professionals and citizens with knowledge and skills to a better world, today and in the future.

- Critical thinking is an important core value of the academic core. Students are motivated to think independently, to remain critical and to test information for truth.

- Education has five design principles that give substance to the core values, namely:

• Education is activating. This is achieved through innovative didactic teaching methods that activate students, whereby we strive for an optimal integration between physical and digital forms of education (personal).

• The student is primarily responsible for his/her own study career and his/her own study success (personal, responsible). With our education we stimulate the autonomy and self-direction of students.

• The VU is inclusive (open, personal, responsible). We want to be a welcome place for students from different backgrounds. The diversity among our students and teachers is integrated in the education, for example through the principles of the Mixed Classroom.

• Social issues are studied and tackled in a multidisciplinary way (open, responsible).

• The VU is aware of its social responsibility and expresses this in its education (open, responsible).

- We want to create added value for society. To this end, the expertise, competences and personal skills of students, PhD students, scientists and professionals are addressed in the right way. This requires an entrepreneurial attitude. At the VU that means: see, create and use opportunities. Be creative and have guts. Take your responsibility. Dare to take risks and dare to experiment.

- Education is changing from primary knowledge transfer to application of knowledge and

skills development. It is important for students and professionals that they can critically filter knowledge from various information sources and estimate value. In addition to expertise, personal skills such as flexibility, self-knowledge, entrepreneurship and creativity are necessary. These skills are important for students and professionals who want to change their lives keep learning for a long time."

2.3 Broader institutional/legal considerations

VU Amsterdam is subject to the evaluation and accreditation of the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO).

Part 3. HEI- Processes (short-term)

There are four channels of education for transversal skills.

3.1 Student psychologists and student wellbeing services

Both the student psychologists and the wellbeing office organize short trainings throughout the year upon their own initiative.

3.2 Career services

Some faculties have career services who also organize short trainings upon their own initiative.

3.3 Initiatives of lecturers organized as extracurricular, voluntary activities

Lecturers and university lecturers can organize workshops, courses… on their own initiative and run these as extracurricular, voluntary activities.

3.4 Academic departments and programs – more long-term than short-term

Lecturers can propose changes to existing courses. If these changes are substantial and may imply changes to the teaching and exam regulations, these changes need to be proposed and approved by the program committee and the education committee.

Adding new courses to a program involves changes to the curriculum that need to be submitted to a curriculum committee that takes place every 5-10 years. The program director and chair of the curriculum overview the curriculum and make suggestions for changes, that require approval by the faculty board.

A typical course is embedded in the 8-8-4 system and can be integrated in the academic year as a 4-week course (Period 3: January, or Period 6: June) or as an 8-week course (Period 1: September-October, Period 2: November-December, Period 4: February-March, Period 5: April-May). During 4-week periods, a course runs on its own. During 8-week periods, two courses run in parallel. Within these periods, the last week is exam week, and no education can take place. In the other weeks, the balance between lectures and workgroups is preferably 1:2, or at the strict minimum 1:1. Every lecture or workgroup takes 1h 45 minutes.

FOREGROUND ANALYSIS

Thematic map & overall conclusion:

Thematic analysis resulted in the thematic map below.

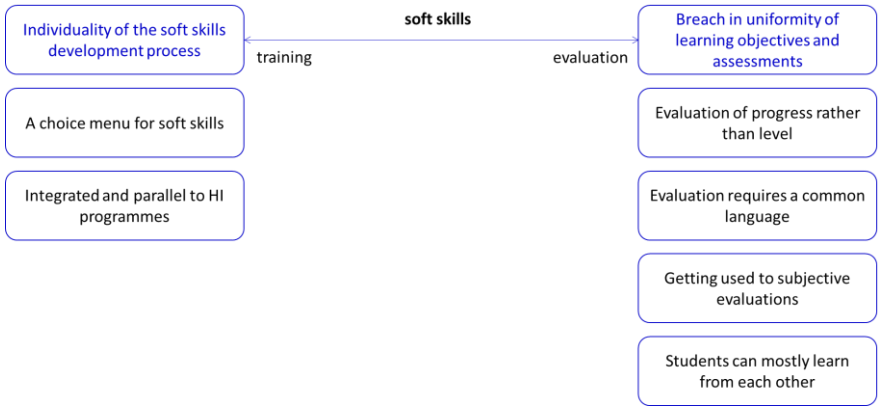


Figure 22

Thematic map. Tension between the individuality of the soft skills development process and uniformity of learning objectives and assessments

1. What are key formats for soft skills training? Should the format of soft skills training be differentiated based on specific criteria?

1.1. A choice menu of soft skills: Softs skills training should be relatable and personalized based on developmental wishes and needs

Soft skills are very broad, and therefore choices need to be made in which soft skills to train. An important opportunity exists to train soft skills that extend beyond study related skills. For example, while collaboration, teamwork and presenting are already well embedded in different formats in different courses, other interpersonal and communication skills such as non-verbal communication, assertiveness and awareness of team dynamics are not embedded yet, but are important as well.

Junior lecturer 2:

Teamwork, for example, is also something that is an academic skill. And if you then integrate that into a subject and keep it very study-related, then it becomes a kind of academic skill that is eventually tested and also the part working together in a group for an assignment for the universities. That is of course of added value, but I think, if you really want to work on soft skills, you could broaden that out to individual, for example communication or non-verbal communication or that sort of thing. Because those are often things that you skip if you focus on, for example, teamwork and set up learning goals for that.

Key formats that are already used in the current curriculum, mostly to train study related soft skills, are (1) internships, (2) tutoring, (3) team assignments, (4) community service learning, and (5) extra-curricular workshops. Other formats may involve coaching. The Level Up soft skills workshop (extra-curricular) and bootcamps (integrated in Study & Career in the Health Sciences program), are the first examples of training of soft skills that extend beyond study related skills.

Student 2:

Things like self-regulation, values, goals, cognitive bias, …, but also emotion, stress, some analytical skills, active listening. Yes that. These were, for example, examples of soft skills that were discussed.

For all these formats, it is essential that the skills to be trained are relatable to students, and training matches students' personal developmental wishes and needs. Ideally, students can choose from a

choice menu to decide themselves which skills they want to develop more.

1.1.1. Development of soft skills is person dependent

Not only the level of individual soft skills varies per student, but also development wishes and development needs are individually different. Development wishes are dependent on interest and own assessment, and awareness of these wishes is that start point for training. Also an understanding of the tasks of graduates when doing future jobs of interest may give an insight in which skills to develop. This would imply that not every student learns the same soft skills, but that is not necessary. Interindividual diversity is a good thing.

Lecturer:

That you make it more optional, for example, so that students can choose more what suits their own needs… Not every student will learn the same, but that may not be necessary. I think so.

Transversal skills expert:

But is it conceivable that you create a kind of menu where you formulate possible soft skills-related learning objectives that you then offer to students, where you say choose one or two or three, depending. And that's what you go for. And we will help you to achieve that.

While soft skills are highly person dependent, this is not specific to soft skills. Students are also highly interindividually different in course related, or academic skills, and choose different electives and internships based on their own interests and development wishes.

Transversal skills expert:

And it seems unlikely to me that all people who graduate with a bachelor's degree in health sciences at the VU have exactly the same knowledge and insight. There are a variety of electives. There is a choice of the subject of your final thesis, so that varies. And those choices are also partly determined by the student's interest and own assessment of the subject in which they want to develop further.

1.1.2. Perception of the relevance of soft skills and openness to develop soft skills is context dependent

Soft skills training could be matched to the actuality, current climate and ongoing news facts, as timing is of what happens in the world may importantly influence the perceived relevance of soft skills and the openness to develop these. For example, current students experience a lot of stress. Stress management may be perceived as more relevant after experiencing high stress levels during the exams. Other examples were professionalism following 'The Voice' scandal, or other skills related to COVID, or the war in Ukraine. While this coupling of skills to current news facts would be ad hoc, they could be integrated in teaching activities, preferably in small discussion groups.

Junior lecturer 1:

Or, for example, I also often thought with my other groups with my first-year students when we just had an exam week and I notice that the stress levels were very high. Then I thought how nice it would have been if we had now had the time to take an hour, to discuss this

with each other and to talk to each other about how you actually deal with such a stressful situation. exam week. Or, for example, I don't know exactly where soft skills ends, but also, for example, with that whole thing at The Voice. Which was such a very big, still very big thing on TV at the time. Then I also thought it would be so nice to talk to students about professional behavior or behavior in the workplace. Or what do you actually think about, for example, how you should relate to someone you work for? All that sort of thing. And I think the timing can make a big difference to how open students are to these kinds of things, but also to what extent they see its relevance.

1.1.3. Some reward may be necessary to motivate soft skills training

Motivated students are likely to engage with voluntary or elective soft skills training. However, not all students will engage on their own initiative, will take soft skills training seriously, or have the reflective ability to understand the relevance or importance of specific soft skills for them personally. As a result, if soft skills training is not mandatory, lots of students will not participate. If a teaching activity is mandatory, this implies that it is considered as important. Likely, the urgency to develop soft skills is reward dependent.

Program director:

I think we'll agree pretty quickly that certain skills that uh yes people judge very subjectively about each other we all find very important, but that the urgency to develop them only arises when you are rewarded, so to speak. Because we are all very used to that in our daily lives. Yes, in our work and in our studies.

1.2. Integrated and parallel: Soft skills training should be integrated in the curriculum, but also requires its own time and space, continuous throughout the curriculum

1.2.1. Soft skills should be integrated in the curriculum

Soft skills can and should be integrated in the curriculum and in all types of courses. Soft skills should be implicit in such a way that soft skills help students to do well in mandatory courses. Currently, education formats are monotonous, and more creativity would allow the integration of soft skills in the curriculum, such as more project-based assignments.

Study related soft skills (e.g. writing, presenting, collaborating) are already well embedded in many courses, and already determine to some extent the grade on many courses.

Ideally, soft skills training in higher education becomes self-evident, and for example, a portfolio on soft skills development could be part of the graduate diploma.

Student 1:

I hope that in ten years we will be in a situation where we don't even have to use the words soft skills and such things anymore, while it has become so normal that so much attention is paid to it that you don't even have to emphasize it so much. And how you can achieve that in my opinion is if you integrate it well into the curriculum of higher education and what I mean specifically by that is the various subjects that you follow, because each subject has its own attributes where you can bring out a certain soft skill.

1.2.2. Soft skills development requires its own time and space

Aside from the integration of soft skills in the courses, time and space should be created in the curriculum for soft skills development. As study related soft skills are more and more integrated in courses, the time spent by the tutors and junior lecturers teaching these may be an opportunity to create time in the curriculum for the development of soft skills and reflection on soft skills that are not study related.

Junior lecturer 2:

But what was nice about the bootcamp that we gave for the project is that you really just planned an hour and a half to talk about teams, for example. Okay, so how do teams work? What is important in teams? How do you deal with that? What is your own team? And because of that? That gave a very nice, casual atmosphere. So if there is actually time scheduled to talk about something. Um yes then. Then everyone is sitting there with okay we're going to talk about this now. And I think that is very different from, for example, saying in a rubric somewhere that you have to be able to work together. That's very different from having a conversation about okay. What is collaboration? How does that work for you? What role do you have? I think those are two fundamentally different things.

Junior lecturer 2:

What I sometimes miss is space and I do that very much myself of course, so there must be room to be able to discuss something like this and not to kind of oh, I only have ten minutes. I would like to talk to you about how you treat each other professionally in the workplace. Yes, that doesn't work. You really need to be able to

brainstorm a bit with each other and it shouldn't feel like oh we only have so many minutes to talk about this. It takes space to have this kind of conversation and good group dynamics to do that kind of conversations. And I occasionally notice that I just don't take that space in my lessons. I think yes, but this still has to be done, and this, and this. So there is no time at all for this conversation then.

1.2.3. Continuous reflection is important

In the integration of soft skills training in higher education, continuity is important. Now, in the first year, students have the opportunity to be supervised by tutors, but students feel let go when they start the second year. Continuous reflection is necessary, for example from tutoring in the first year to internships in the third year.

Junior lecturer 1:

I definitely think it's good to occasionally think about, hey, what growth are you going through or and how have you changed in recent times? And I, I think what often still happens is that everything is still pretty much on its own. There's not just a kind of continuous line. In the first year, there is your tutor, so that's the one person you see all year and I don't know if there's anything like that in the second year. Or in the third year and then you have your internship, which you do the same for a longer period of time and which you can think about. But other than that, I think there is little coming back or reflection moments.

1.2.4. The role of the teacher is critical

The engagement of the teacher in any soft skills training program is essential. The teacher should be comfortable to engage with the integration, training and evaluation of soft skills.

An important role for teachers and tutors could be initiating the conversation on development needs and wishes. However, the evaluation of growth in soft skills by teachers or tutors is very difficult, and can only be done by someone who is in close and continuous contact and interaction with the student. Ideally, the teacher takes on the role of a coach who is personally involved with the student's development process. These persons, who could take on the role of tutors, internship supervisors, lecturers or coaches, should be educated and trained to take on this role, which requires specific training for teachers, as the supervision of progress in soft skills requires psychology which is not a subject every teacher is trained in.

Chair education committee:

Psychological counseling. For example. I saw a lot of things come back from [researcher: Elke] that are applied in psychology, cognitive behavioral therapy and things like that. So then you kind of take over the work of yes and that corner, so to speak. Which might be a good thing to support students in that way. But that's something else, I guess. Yes, a little more towards the learning objectives and what you are looking at. … Uh, it's not like statistics that everyone is trained in.

At this moment, embedding of soft skills, for example in courses or internships, is very much dependent on the teacher. Also the extent and content of student tutoring programs is dependent on the program and year students are in.

2. How to evaluate the efficacy of the soft skills training?

2.1. Progress in soft skills development should be evaluated rather than the level of soft skills, which requires reflection, feedback, conversation and discussion

More important than the level of soft skills a student is demonstrating, is the progress and growth a student makes. This requires reflection, feedback, conversation and discussion. Students seem to find it difficult to think about the future and self-reflect on their soft skills. The IKIGAI exercise may help with reflection based on insights in who you are as a person and your values. Personal tutoring and individual coaching may be a good opportunity to initiate the conversation about soft skills and provide feedback. They allow individual attention to the student, and are currently underused. These conversations could also be integrated in internships.

Reflection reports first come to mind when formalizing reflection. Reflection reports could give insight in the learning process, and make it more explicit. However, they are often a box to check, and students don't use it to make most of the reflection process.

Program director:

I see there very often that it's kind of a must and that uh, that's all. You can write it down, but that doesn't mean that you actually give it meaning.

2.2. Evaluation of soft skills requires a common language

Evaluation of soft skills, and the progress in soft skills, requires a common language in which it is made explicit what different levels of soft skills mean. This language must be understood by all everyone of all education levels. The Louis tool of the Aurora framework may provide a first good step to develop this language and integrate it in courses, internships, coaching…

Transversal skills expert:

So you will have to have a language with the students to discuss what progress is in a certain soft skill. What is a higher level of behavior in a particular soft skill and what is a lower level. And then it remains inevitable, I think with these kinds of things that it is to a great extent a subjective, quite an intersubjective assessment.

2.3. Both lecturers and students should get used to subjective evaluations

The evaluation of soft skills is no statistics. Quantitative evaluations are difficult and problematic, and the use of numbers for the evaluations of soft skills is doubtful. Soft skills should not be

measured, but should be evaluated. This evaluation of soft skills is subjective. This should be acknowledged by students and teachers, and both will have to get used to this.

Program director:

We have to recognize that that is very subjective. I evaluate very differently about how one person in the team works together than another and that will remain. That's never going to change because we want it to be uniform. And I think we have to recognize that too. And then students also have to get used to it and teachers perhaps even more so.

2.3.1. Grades and rubrics for soft skills evaluations are risky when they turn into a checklist

Rubrics very easily become a checklist of boxes to tick. For this reason, the evaluation of soft skills by means of rubrics is very tricky and not advised. Importantly, learning goals don't necessarily have to be translated in rubrics.

Transversal skills expert :

As soon as it turns into ticking off a rubric, then you are shooting yourself in the foot.

2.3.2. Whether learning goals or outcomes should be formulated is debatable

Disagreement exists on whether learning goals on soft skills should be formulated.

Some people (e.g. a soft skills expert) are convinced that it is essential to set learning goals, and communicate these to students. They indicate that learning goals are more important even than the teaching formats. They importantly note that uniformly formulated learning goals do allow individual differences.

Others (e.g. a junior lecturer) disagree. They indicate that uniformly formulated learning goals for soft skills are fiction, and do not need to be formulated explicitly (e.g. in syllabi). For some, formulating learning goals is considered very difficult.

Transversal skills expert:

So I think the idea that learning objectives are identical for everyone is a fiction for the subject-related learning objectives. And I think it is also a fiction for the personal knowledge and skills and insights that people develop in the study. And that's okay. I think it's just good too. … I think it is important that subject teachers help students to develop subject-related and non-subject-related skills. In Aurora I know of a professor. He teaches pharmacology and therefore teaches a chemistry course. And he said I think it is important that in my profession my students also become a little more aware of where they can become stronger in working, in a team, in collaboration. So he teaches pharmacology. He has also formulated teamwork as the learning objective of his profession. He has explained to his students. I would like you to develop in such and such and such and such ways in my profession. So that's not a tick the box. Write the report. No, I'd like to see you guys work better together and I'll give you feedback on that.

Junior lecturer 1:

I don't think the word learning goals and soft skills match you very much. Then you also expect students to put that down on paper or something or eventually reflect on that. But I think that's a very, very important part of developing your soft skills. Talking, having conversations, discussing, that kind of sharing, that kind of thing.

2.4. All stakeholders can provide insight into the evaluation of development process, but students can mostly learn from each other

While contact with the work field and professionals can importantly contribute to the development of soft skills, students can learn more from each other in supervised groups than from lecturers. University programmes are too solitary and should make more use of group dynamics between students. Group conversations among students are more useful than individual conversations, although they require a good group dynamic. Students can easily relate to each other, and can learn more from each other than from lecturers.

Lecturer 1:

Yes, that students may benefit more from learning it from each other than from learning it from us. Because they can indeed relate better to each other than to us.

ROADMAP

On July 1st and 6th 2022, VUA organized three co-creation workshops after the completion of both background and foreground analyses. Invitations to participate in the co-creation workshop were distributed to lecturers, internship coordinators, program directors and coordinators, chairs of the education committee, career office, mental wellbeing office, students and external persons with an interest and expertise in transversal skills.

In total, 26 persons participated of which 1 program coordinator, 1 chair of the education committee, 2 internship coordinators, 2 junior lecturer, 6 lecturers, 9 BSc students, 1 MSc, 1 PhD student, 1 career office representative, 1 wellbeing office representative, and 1 external transversal skills expert.

The program of the co-creation workshop looked as follows:

- 13:00-13:30 Walk in
- 13:30-13:40 Welcome & introductions
- 13:40-14:00 Level Up project summary
- 14:00-14:30 Co-creation activity STEP 1
- 14:30-14:40 Break
- 14:40-15:10 Co-creation activity STEP 2
- 15:10-15:40 Co-creation activity STEP 3
- 15:40-16:00 Round up

The Level Up project summary consisted of a presentation discussing the context, aim, activities and findings of the project.

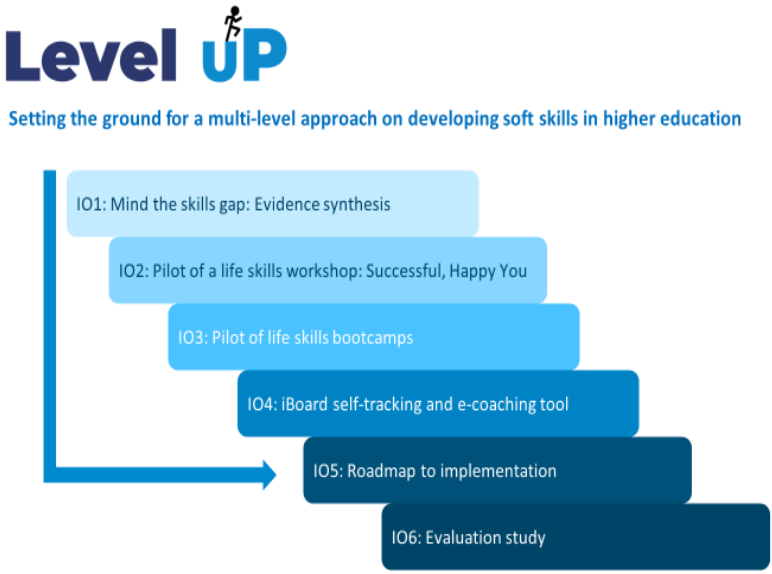


Figure 23

In each of the 3 co-creation workshops, participants (based on their background) were asked to create a softs skills road map for soft skills training integrated in one of three specific educational activities. These educational activities were chosen based on the VU-specific findings of IO1, and the background and foreground analysis of IO5. This way, 3 groups of participants reflected on soft skills training in

1. the study & career program (a program which aims to guide students in future career interests and choices)
2. internships
3. a coaching program.

By means of a poster, post-its and handouts, participants reflected on the ideal methods, implementation, learning objectives, evaluation, team and reward of soft skills training, considering pros and cons of the different options, in the chosen education activity.

This process for each co-creation workshop took place in 3 steps:

1. reflection in homogenous groups (students vs. staff; to give students and staff their own voice initially)

Figure 24

2. integration of reflections across groups (to merge ideas of students and staff)
3. presentation of the results across groups.

An example of the handout:

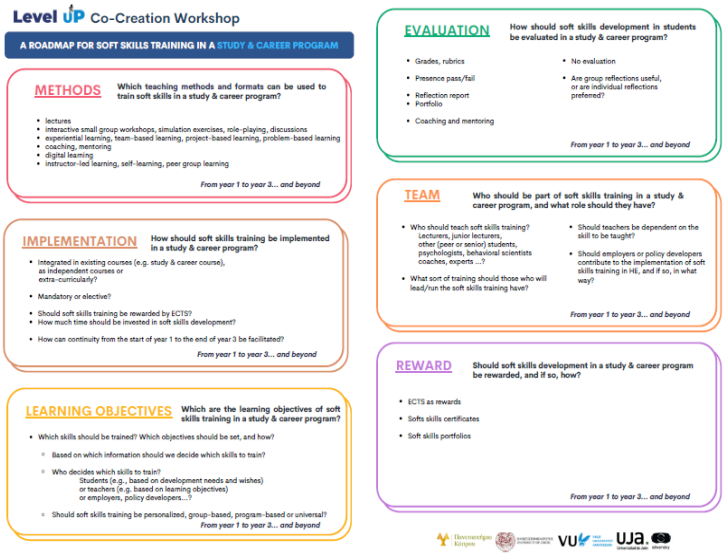


Figure 25

With the help of the handout, participants could write on large post-it notes to add on to the following A0 poster:

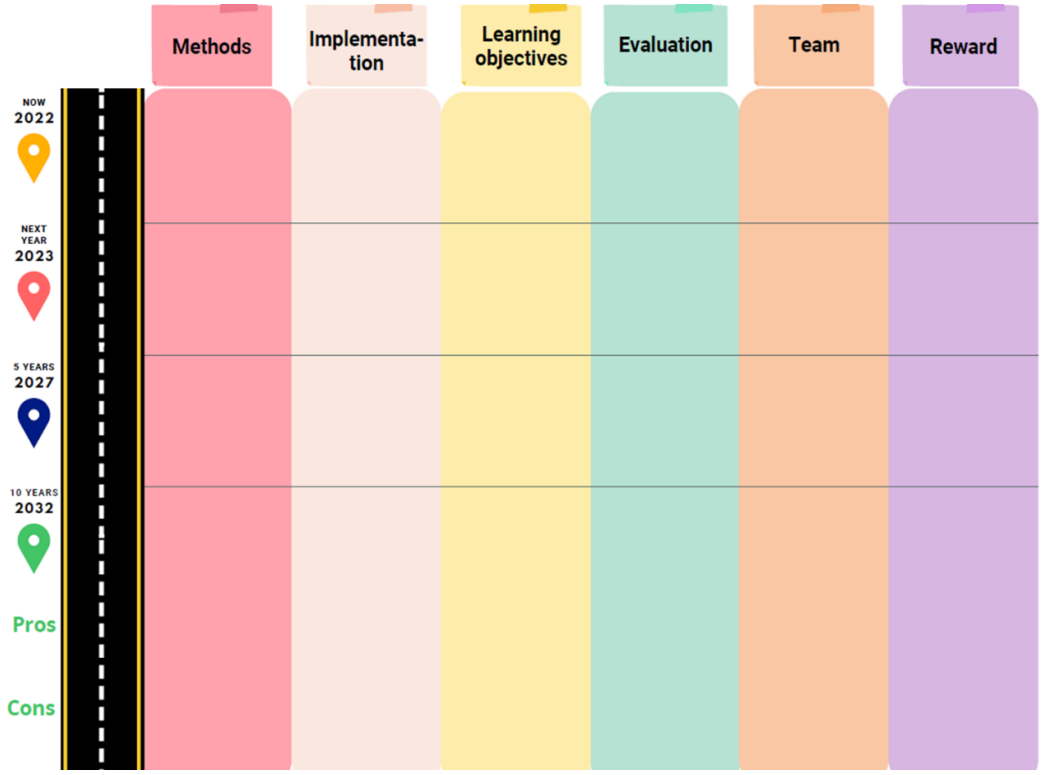


Figure 26

Integrated reflections

Below, current and future methods, implementation, learning objectives, evaluation, team, and rewards for soft skills education are summarized.

1. Methods

- General
  - Tutoring, mentoring, coaching
  - Community service learning

    - Experiential learning
    - Internships
- Internships
    - Now:
        - In principle: mentoring by a supervisor, but methods are highly dependent on supervisor
    - Future:
        - Small, peer-to-peer, student groups
- Study & Career
    - Now:
        - The only course in which soft skills are addressed explicitly
        - Work groups, taught by junior lecturers
    - Future:
        - Practice soft skills with experts, and use role play to mimic real-life problems
        - Keep in the level up self-assessments (without writing essays)
        - Offer 1-on-1 mentoring (e.g. by office hours)
        - Introduce soft skills in a plenary lecture but create peer groups in which soft skills can be implemented and keep those groups together throughout the program
        - Organize modules for individual soft skills expert training

2. Implementation

- General
    - In courses: mostly implicit, but also explicit
    - In programs: formulation of formal end terms of the program, but not operationalized explicitly
    - In internships
    - Across programs, centrally organized, extracurricular (e.g. Broader Mind course, student psychologists trainings, workshops during wellbeing week, introduction week, career week)
    - External programs offered at the university (Life Hack, a free, online life skills program offered by Caring Universities; not known by all programs)
    - Partly mandatory, partly elective

- Internships
    - Now:
        - Implementation (whether soft skills are mentioned, discussed or worked on) is highly dependent on supervisor
    - Next year:
        - New assessment form of the internship to include an evaluation of soft skills
        - A manual or training for internship supervisors on how to facilitate soft skills development
        - Stepwise assessments at several moments during the internship
    - In 5-10 years:
        - A learning trajectory on soft skills throughout the Bachelor and Master program of which the internships are one component
        - Group evaluation of soft skills, supervised by the junior lecturers
- Study & Career
    - Now:
        - Course is a mandatory, 0 ECTS course
    - Future:
        - In year 1: make soft skills development mandatory
            - Integrate awareness of soft skills
            - Focus on self-reflection of strengths and weaknesses
            - Avoid administration/tasks/assignments
            - Rather include personal discussions, coaching and group sessions
        - In year 2: organize elective workshops, but this would require a good reward
        - Establish continuity throughout the full program
        - Integrate with the Broader Mind program

3. Learning objectives

- General
    - Set objectives by course examiner

    - Chosen objectives by students
- Internships
    - Now:
        - Soft skills are not clearly communicated as learning objectives of the internship, yet can be decisive for success of the internship
    - Future:
        - Formulate the soft skills that are necessary to do a successful internship as explicit learning objectives
        - Let the learning objectives depend on previous assessments (e.g. set the learning objectives of the master internship based on the evaluation at the end of the bachelor internship)
- Study & Career
    - Now:
        - Learning objectives are chosen by teachers
    - Future:
        - Pick your own: Let students choose their own learning objectives from a list of options based on self-evaluations

4. Evaluation

- General
    - Portfolios
    - Assignments of daily life application
- Internships
    - Now:
        - At the go/no go stage (preliminary evaluation 4 weeks after the start of the internship to determine whether the internship can continue as is), soft skills are not formally evaluated, unless soft skills are an obvious problem for the student or when the supervisors considers soft skills important
        - At the end of the internship, softs skills are formally evaluated but primarily to support the grade of the internship report. Yet, when an internship fails, this is mostly due to a lack of soft skills.
    - Future:

            - Mandatory, formative assessments throughout the internship
            - Formulate expectations during a conversation with students before the internship
            - Evaluate soft skills during a conversation with students after the internship
            - Evaluate progression in soft skills instead of the level of soft skills
            - Peer feedback and advice under supervision of the junior lecturers
            - Let students create their own assessment rubric based on their own development wishes
- Study & Career
    - Now:
        - Pass/fail based on complete/incomplete attendance/assignments
    - Future:
        - Keep pass/fail
        - Let students create a portfolio throughout the program
        - Let peers (e.g. senior students) review the portfolios
        - Have a discussion at the end to discuss personal growth (based on own set criteria/expectations/wishes)

5. Team

- General
    - Junior lecturers
    - Trained lecturers
    - Peers
- Internships
    - Now:
        - Persons involved in the internship: student, VU supervisor, daily supervisor (different from the VU supervisor in case of an external internship), internship coordinator
        - Supervisors are not trained or guided for the supervision of (soft skills development in the) internships

    - Future:
        - Organize internships in group internship (different students join the same internship project but address different research questions)
        - For students who take on individual internships that cannot be organized as group internships, create peer groups
        - Involve the junior lecturers, and trainers of soft skills to train internship supervisors
- Study & Career
    - Now:
        - Persons involved: one senior lecturer, and junior lecturers (untrained to coach)
    - Future:
        - Keep the junior lecturers (but allow more time to spend on soft skills coaching)
        - Organize coaching training for teachers (junior lecturers)
        - Add peer groups (e.g. junior and senior students)
        - Add experts, future employers

6. Rewards

- General
    - Certificate
    - ECTS
- Internships
    - Now:
        - 20% of the internship is evaluated by attitude and execution (which consists of soft skills)
        - Interpretation of these evaluations is highly variable between supervisors
    - Future:
        - Continue a 20% contribution of soft skills evaluation to the total internship grade
        - Evaluate the process and progress based on criteria chosen by students
- Study & Career
    - Now:
        - No reward other than pass to next year

- Future:
  - In year 1: Keep pass/fail, mandatory to move on to next year
  - In year 2: certificate based on elective
  - ECTS…
    - Not if ECTS requires a grade
    - ECTS are not an option as they are needed to address all program requirements

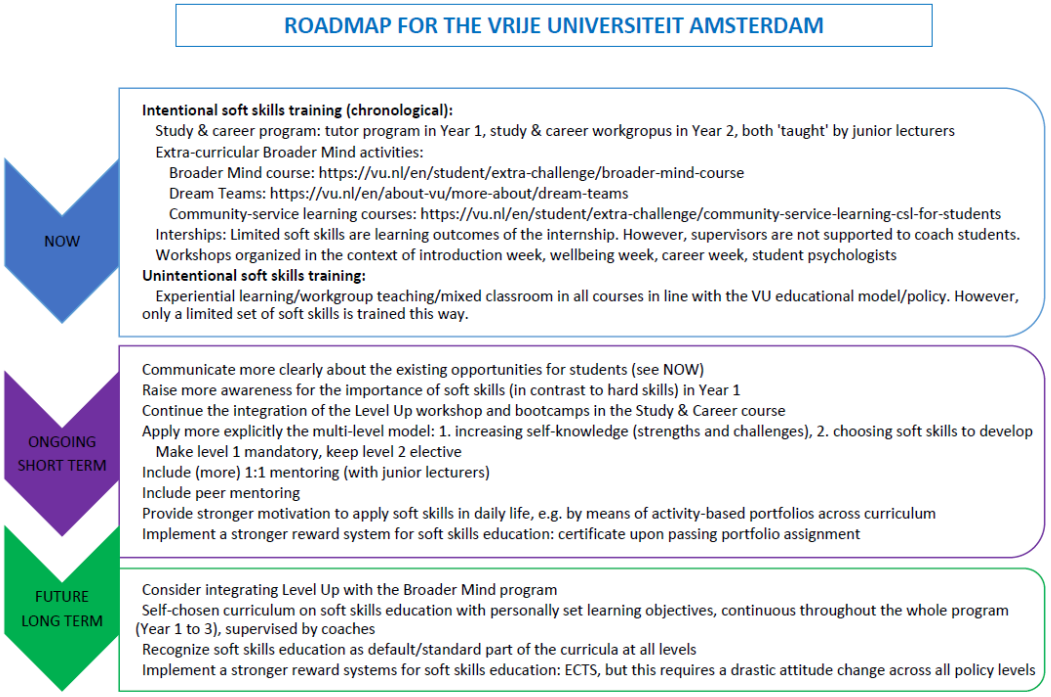


Figure 27

STAPPENPLAN VOOR VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT AMSTERDAM
NU
•Expliciete, intentionele, geplande soft skills training:
•Studie en loopbaan programma: tutorprogramma in jaar 1, Studie en loopbaan werkgroepen in jaar 2, gegeven door de juniordocenten
•Extra-curriculaire Broader Mind activiteiten:
•Broader Mind vak en pijlers: bijv. https://vu.nl/en/student/extra-challenge/broader-mind-course
•Dream Teams: https://vu.nl/en/about-vu/more-about/dream-teams
•Community-service learning vakken: https://vu.nl/en/student/extra-challenge/community-service-learning-csl-for-students
•Stages: Een beperkt aantal soft skills zijn leeruitkomsten van de stage.
•Begeleiders worden echter niet ondersteund om studenten te coachen.
•Workshops georganiseerd in de context van de introductieweek, health and wellbeing week, carrièreweek, studentenpsychologen
•Impliciete en expliciete soft skills training geïntegreerd in vakken:
•Experiential learning/werkgroeponderwijs/mixed classroom onderwijs in alle vakken overeenkomstig het beleid en onderwijsmodel van de VU. Slechts een beperkte set van soft skills wordt getraind op deze manier.
LOPEND KORTE TERMIJN
•Duidelijker communiceren over de bestaande mogelijkheden voor studenten (zie NU)
•Meer aandacht voor het belang van soft skills (in tegenstelling tot hard skills) in jaar 1
•Doorgaan met de integratie van de Level Up workshop en bootcamps in het vak Studie & Loopbaan
•Het multi-level model explicieter toepassen: 1. vergroten van zelfkennis (sterktes en uitdagingen), 2. kiezen om soft skills te ontwikkelen: Maak niveau 1 verplicht, organiseer niveau 2 als keuzevak
•Opnemen van (meer) 1:1 mentoring (met junior docenten)
•Opnemen van peer mentoring
•Zorgen voor een sterkere motivatie om soft skills toe te passen in het dagelijks leven, bijv. door middel van activiteitenportfolio's in het hele curriculum
•Implementeren van een sterker beloningssysteem voor onderwijs in soft skills: bijv. een certificaat bij het slagen voor portfolio-opdracht
TOEKOMST LANGE TERMIJN
•Overweeg om Level Up te integreren met het Broader Mind programma
•Zelfgekozen curriculum van onderwijs in soft skills met persoonlijk bepaalde leerdoelen, doorlopend gedurende het hele programma (jaar 1 t.e.m. jaar 3), begeleid door coaches
•Erken onderwijs in soft skills als standaardonderdeel van de leerplannen op alle niveaus
•Implementeer een sterker beloningssysteem voor onderwijs in soft skills: ECTS, maar dit vereist een drastische mentaliteitsverandering op alle beleidsniveaus

Figure 28

CASE 4: UNIVERSIDAD DE JAEN

BACKGROUND ANALYSIS

1. People

1.1 UJA structure

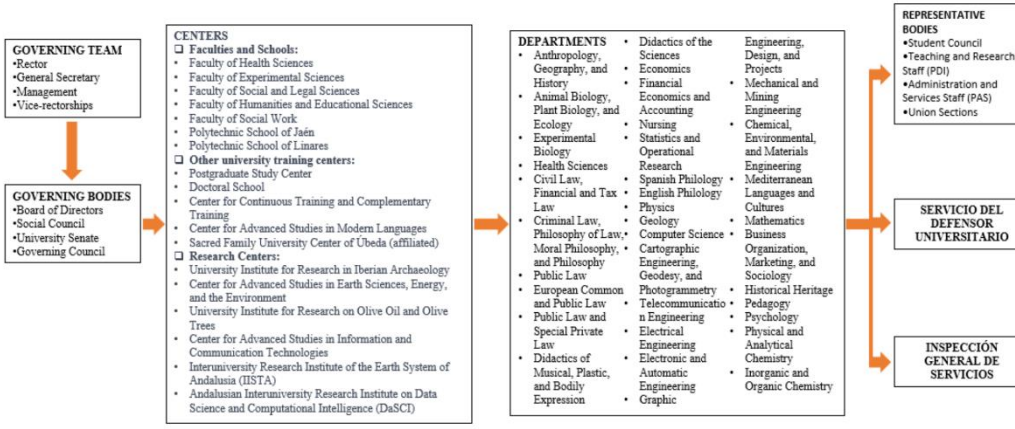


Figure 29

The UJA organization structure is as follows:

1.2 People

Taking into account the departments of the University of Jaén, support for the education in transversal skills can be garnered from several departments, notably Anthropology, Geography, and History; Health Sciences; Criminal Law, Philosophy of Law, Moral Philosophy, and Philosophy; Didactics of Musical, Plastic, and Corporal Expression; Didactics of Sciences; Business Organization, Marketing, and Sociology; Pedagogy; and Psychology.

Furthermore, there is substantial backing from the university's governing bodies, specifically from the Vice-Rectorate for Teaching and Research Staff. The university's psychology unit is another valuable resource, offering therapeutic services to both students and university staff, in addition to providing courses and workshops for their betterment.

1.3 Stakeholders

In collaboration with the university faculty and the Student Council, there is the potential to establish a liaison committee composed of academic representatives and students.

This committee could organize events and seminars focused on transversal skills. Through these events, we would have the opportunity to invite industry representatives, alumni,

and other notable professionals to discuss the current and emerging demands of the job market. Additionally, we could implement surveys and feedback tools to gather opinions from employers and alumni, allowing for curriculum adjustments in line with the needs of the professional environment.

As part of the Student & Educational affairs services, transversal skills might be taught by student psychologists and people of the student wellbeing office and the career office.

Within each faculty, each department has a team of junior lecturers, that, in addition to supporting first year courses, take on personal tutoring and teaching of academic skills, under supervision of lecturers and university lecturers, who may also integrate transversal skills in their courses.

1.4 Students

Each academic year, students elect a representative for their respective course. These representatives maintain close communication with department heads and are actively engaged with the University of Jaén's Student Council (CEUJA). The CEUJA, an integral part of the university's structure, bears the responsibility of articulating and advocating for the desires and interests of all students.

2. University Strategy (long-term)

2.1 Mission

The mission of the University of Jaén (UJA) deeply intertwines with the concept of transversal skills, emphasizing the comprehensive development of its students. As the mission states, UJA seeks "through teaching, research, and knowledge transfer, to combine the comprehensive training of a critical, professional citizenship," which resonates with the goal of nurturing a range of soft and hard skills adaptable to diverse contexts. Moreover, the university's emphasis on equipping individuals to be "committed to the sustainability of their environment and adapted to the needs of a changing society" showcases the importance of adaptability and social responsibility, two crucial transversal skills. Furthermore, with a focus on "generating, developing, and transmitting science, technology, and culture," UJA ensures that students are not only grounded in technical knowledge but also in broader cultural and interpersonal competencies. Also, UJA's dedication to "continuous improvement" and its "high degree of social commitment" further highlight the alignment of its mission with fostering skills that transcend traditional academic boundaries, preparing students for both professional and societal roles.

2.2 Strategic Plan

The PEUJA 21-25 of Universidad de Jaén (UJA) underscores a deep-seated commitment to fostering transversal skills within its student body, ensuring they are adequately prepared for both personal and professional challenges. Specifically, Objective 1 (OE1) showcases UJA's forward-thinking approach, highlighting the link between comprehensive education and employability. For example, OE1.1's emphasis on a singular, flexible, and innovative teaching model is a clear nod to the acquisition of transversal competencies. In essence, it's not just about mastering subject-specific knowledge but also about gaining skills like adaptability, critical thinking, and problem-solving. Moreover, OE1.4 goes further to highlight the importance of cultivating students who are not only professionals but also socially responsible individuals capable of adapting to changing societal needs. Such qualities are transversal in nature, spanning across different fields and industries, making students versatile in their approach to both academic and real-world challenges.

Digital competence, a vital transversal skill in the modern world, is addressed in Objective 5 (OE5). Particularly, OE5.2 underscores the urgency of integrating digital competency training, emphasizing its transversal nature, which is applicable and essential across various disciplines and professions.

Lastly, the UJA's dedication to social responsibility, as showcased in Objective 6 (O6), indicates its commitment to another core transversal skill. Especially, O6.3 integrates the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with the university's curricula. This alignment ensures students are not only

academically grounded but also ethically and globally conscious, a transversal skillset that resonates across numerous sectors.

2.3 Broader institutional/legal considerations

The UJA is subject to the evaluation and accreditation of the Higher Authority of Higher Education (Ministry of Education). The MA/BA/PhD degrees offered by Department of Psychology holds an accreditation that is valid (https://cep.ujaen.es/acreditacionmaster-psicologia-general-sanitaria) Both strategic plans and internal quality assurance systems are evaluated according to processes laid out by Spanish Ministry and External Accreditation Agencies.

3. Educating transversal skills (short-term)

There are four educational channels for transversal skills at the University of Jaén.

3.1 Departments of the University of Jaén:

The diverse departments within the University of Jaén are uniquely positioned to tailor soft skills training to the particular needs and interests of their students. By proposing soft skills training sessions, departments can leverage their expertise to provide relevant and engaging content. Once teachers express their interest and undergo the necessary training, they can spearhead specific courses tailored to their respective departments. Recognizing the benefits of a collaborative approach, the institution can further foster inter-departmental training. This initiative not only encourages departments to share resources and knowledge but also ensures that a broader student audience benefits from a comprehensive range of courses.

3.2 Department of Psychology:

The Department of Psychology, given its profound understanding of human behavior and interpersonal dynamics, is exceptionally well-suited to spearhead initiatives related to transversal skills training. By weaving these skills into their academic program, they can ensure that students recognize the value of such abilities in both professional and personal contexts. The integration can be achieved by subtly incorporating these skills into regular subjects or by designing dedicated courses and training sessions. With the department's expertise, students can benefit from training that is both theoretically grounded and practically applicable.

3.3 Programs to involve students in the training sessions:

Empowering students to become part of the solution can bring about a transformation in the way soft skills training is perceived and delivered. Students from the Department of Psychology, equipped with the foundational knowledge in the subject and the training provided by the dedicated team, can become ambassadors of soft skills training. They can lead sessions, form voluntary study groups, and even organize workshops in collaboration with the student council. This student-led approach not only provides trainers with valuable teaching and leadership experience but also ensures that the sessions are relatable, engaging, and in tune with the needs of the student body.

3.4 Psychology Service Center:

The Psychology Service Center, with its emphasis on mental well-being and holistic student development, is a natural ally in the effort to bolster transversal skills training. Given their existing infrastructure for delivering mental health-related training, the

introduction of modules focusing on transversal skills can be seamless. Tailoring these sessions to address both mental well-being and essential life skills can ensure that students receive a holistic education. By offering training that is both therapeutic and skill-enhancing, the Psychology Service Center can cater to a diverse range of student needs, ensuring they are better equipped to handle the challenges of modern life.

FOREGROUND ANALYSIS

In the analysis of the interactions in the focus group, we can identify two themes of relevant interest.

On the one hand, the central idea is the importance of carrying out an integrated planning that allows to combine soft skills training with the specific study plans of each area of HE in a useful and realistic way. From this perspective, it would be necessary, in the first place, to provide specific training in soft skills to teachers, so that they can set up tasks that encourage the development of soft skills through practices based on simulations of real situations that may arise in the work environment.

On the other hand, the importance of having experts, more specifically the department of psychology, in the processes of design, evaluation and supervision of training courses is emphasized, since experts, together with employers, are the main advisors to management teams, responsible for the final curriculum planning.

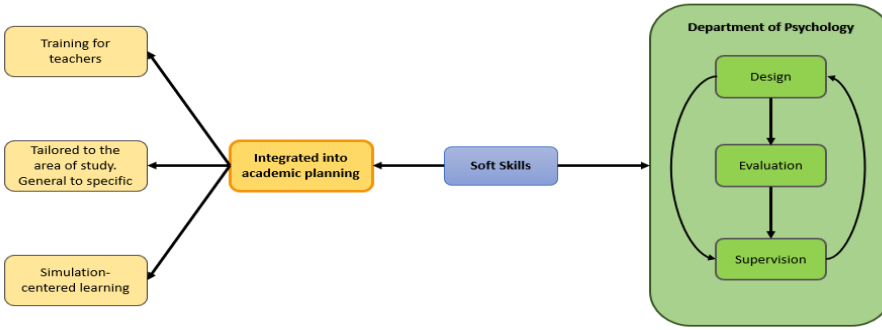


Figure 30

Soft skills integrated into academic planning

Training for teachers

There was majority agreement that the optimal way to bring soft skills to students in HE is through teacher training in these skills. Therefore, there is a need for primary soft skills training for teachers so that they, in turn, will be able to put soft skills training into daily practice. This has to be done in a planned way without improvisation.

> Participant 1. Professional involved in HR, recruitment or personnel selection: It should be integrated into the classes themselves, on a day-to-day basis. It is the most efficient and realistic way to reach all students. If you do workshops separately, on a voluntary basis or as electives, it will not reach the general student body. If you train from the first day you enter the university, you will really learn.

However, this perspective is not problem-free. It must be taken into account that not all teachers (personally) have well-developed soft

skills. This would make it very difficult for them to training efficiently, since it is difficult to provide training in a soft skill that one does not possess. The possibility arises that volunteer teachers interested in soft skills could be the ones to train students, receiving appropriate compensation from educational organizations.

> Participant 2. Professional in HE involved in initiatives to enhance soft skills: Although it is true that it cannot be taught by all university professors, as I agree with you that all professors do not have soft skills, but there are "brave" professors who could be in charge of this type of activities, so that at least work could begin in this direction. It is important to choose the 4-5 most important soft skills, as a matter of efficiency, since we do not have enough resources to train in all the competencies, renouncing to others.

However, they do not rule out training in an independent workshop format, separate from the compulsory programming of the course. This would lead us to the conclusion that, if this format is chosen, it should not be mandatory, but voluntary, since the group does not contemplate subjects exclusively related to soft skills.

> Participant 6. Student trained in soft skills: taking into account that I was in the previous courses, I think that the methodology you followed (in the basic and advanced soft skills courses) are a good way to bring these skills closer to the students. But I think that, in the end, a faster way would be to give tools to the teachers, who are in charge of the hard skills, to integrate the soft skills. They would be like guides for the student on what they can improve on.

Tailored to the area of study. General to specific

There was agreement in the focus group that the most effective way to bring soft skills into the educational system is through the identification of a small number of soft skills that are especially important for each subject area.

> Participant 1. Professional involved in HR, recruitment or personnel selection: we need to start at the bottom, defining soft skills well. There is no point in curricula including 50 soft skills, because we are not going to get there. We have to identify the 5 or 10 most important ones for our students in their working life and define the trainings. And then figure out how to assess them. We know it's difficult, but it's not impossible and for that we need the experts. There is no point in not assessing skills, otherwise we are setting our students up for failure.

For example, certain soft skills do not seem to have the same importance in all areas of HE study. A computer scientist who will be teleworking autonomously at home will not need the same leadership as a business section manager.

> Participant 4. Employer involved in HR, recruitment or selection of personnel: Leadership or teamwork has many different facets. There are different types of leadership, for example, the teamwork of a surgeon is not the same as that of a programmer teleworking from home. Perhaps we all have to

> learn the same concepts but with different intensity or oriented to their work.

That is why a good study of the work environment to which the training is aimed at will be necessary so that we can establish a realistic number of soft skills to teach.

From this dialogue emerged an idea with which all participants agreed: the need to think first about general soft skills, which are broader and need to be learned earlier and over a longer period of time, and then move on to specific soft skills tailored to the area of study in question.

In this sense, training should be operationalized by moving from the general to the specific (or from less to more), taking into account the point at which they are in HE. This would translate into designing common and general training in the first two years of study. And, once this base of general soft skills is in place, adapting the last two years of study to the specific skills identified in each field of work.

> Participant 3. Professional in HE involved in curriculum development: Soft skills are differentiated, but in practice it is very difficult to separate them, as they are closely related. It is difficult for you to know other people well if you do not know yourself. However, you can be a greater expert in some than in others. But at a basic level you should have a good base in all of them and then deepen in some of them to be more expert. In summary, I think it is best to give general soft skills at basic levels and for more in-depth training opt for more specialized training in those skills that you want to develop in relation to your profession.

Simulation-centered learning

The group unanimously expressed the idea that the way NOT to learn soft skills is through an exclusively theoretical format.

Soft skills training should be approached through practice. There was agreement in the group that simulation of real situations is the most beneficial for both students and teachers. Video and audio recording of the performances in these simulations is very useful, allowing feedback and molding behaviors.

> Participant 1. Professional involved in HR, recruitment or personnel selection: In my experience, simulations are the best. At least, in the trainings we do, internally, for promotion or change of position. For example, for unit managers, where mutual collaboration is very important, we find that simulations help and unite the team a lot. For teamwork it is essential.

> Participant 3. Professional in HE involved in curriculum development: We do a lot of role playing when someone doesn't know how to do something. They give you some instructions, you see how someone else does it, so you have a model to base it on to do it yourself at the end. It's the most ideal thing to do, to learn soft skills through practice.

The use of more novel techniques to test the soft skills learned, such as escape rooms, fake job interviews or recordings of television interviews or videoblogs, approaching formats well known to young people, such as the world of streaming or social networks, was proposed.

> Participant 5. Professional in HE involved in student advice or counseling: it depends on the type of skills to be worked on. For example, it occurs to me that for issues that have to do with group work, time management, etc., an escape room or something similar could be considered, in which a group of people have to agree and work together towards the same goal, solving conflicts. For skills such as public speaking, communication... debates on relevant or irrelevant topics, simulated interviews, such as press conferences, could be considered. I think there are many activities that can be done, but it will depend on the skill.

The role of the Department of Psychology in bringing soft skills to HE.

Design. Counting on employers

Employers are a figure of great importance for the future of young people in HE, so the group agrees that they are important to know the reality of the current working world, which will allow us to offer useful and realistic training to our students.

> Participant 4. Employer involved in HR, recruitment or selection of personnel: It may look bad that employers collaborate in this sense with Universities, but at the end the companies are the ones that are going to hire you. If the Universities, which prepare you to enter the companies, work in some way side by side with them, you will advance faster.

> Participant 6. Student trained in soft skills: a very important issue is that, both for technical issues and for soft skills, employers know what is realistically required in the labor market today. Sometimes we are taught things at university that turn out to be outdated when we go out into the labor market.

Employers should have an important role as advisors of the soft skills that are required in each of the work contexts. That is why having a wide range of advising employers in different areas of knowledge will be favorable both for adapting our training and for the students.

However, the design should be the responsibility of the university management and dean's offices, with the psychology department having the most important role as advisors in the design of training courses.

> Participant 2. Professional in HE involved in initiatives to enhance soft skills: I believe that this should first be approached strategically by the Board of Directors. It is not a matter of including subjects on soft skills, but of reviewing the curricular itinerary of the students, therefore counting on the dean's offices of the center. In such a way that it is in the daily classroom activities where the teacher is "forced" to propose activities that develop certain competencies, which have already been previously defined and agreed upon with the Board of Directors.

> Participant 3. Professional in HE involved in curriculum development: I agree that employers should have a clear advisory role in the university, but the university organization has the last word. It is a question of finding a balance.

> Participant 2. Professional in HE involved in initiatives to enhance soft skills: experts are fundamental in the design. From this joint analysis from the management and the deans' offices, psychology professors should be involved, basically, so that they can design how we are going to develop these soft skills, with what type of specific activity, what type of courses.... It depends on the methodological agreement. As well as introducing practices that have an impact on different soft skills.

At the same time, emphasis was placed on the figure of the Social Council in the University, which, in theory, is the liaison body between the University and the outside world. It is an organism that can bring us closer to the present labor reality.

Evaluation. Scientifically validated assessment instruments or observation.

There are scientifically validated instruments to assess certain soft skills, although not all of them.

That is why, for those soft skills that have validated instruments, it is essential to use these instruments.

When this is not possible, we should choose to evaluate through observation (if possible with inter-judge evaluations) of simulated

situations or role plays. This allows us to evaluate while providing feedback that enhances learning.

> Participant 3. Professional in HE involved in curriculum development: to evaluate, evaluation instruments for different soft skills. But in the end the most specific thing is to see how it is done, through role plays. To see concrete speech, concrete evaluation. Video recording and then evaluate, to train and evaluate at the same time. Importance of evidence-based instruments, as there are many in hhbb that are not. Inter-judge observation if possible.

Supervision

Closely related to the design of soft skills training is supervision. Just as the Board of Directors and the dean's office in the university should be the main responsible for the design of soft skills training, so should it be for the supervision of soft skills training.

In this sense, it is more important to have experts from the Department of Psychology to evaluate in each area of knowledge how the trainings are working.

In addition, satisfaction questionnaires can be used, both for students in HE and for the teachers themselves. In this way we obtain valuable information from both parties that can move us in more beneficial directions for all parties.

> Participant 2. Professional in HE involved in initiatives to enhance soft skills: I agree, the same agencies that have designed all the training should be the same ones that oversee it. Here, the psychology department would have an even more

intense role, which can be responsible for being in charge of this supervision, referring the information to the management.

ROADMAP

On June 25th, 2022, we organized an interactive brainstorming session with a team of local specialists to discuss the insights derived from our primary and secondary evaluations. All participating students from the various phases of LevelUp were invited, along with the vicechancellors and those in charge of the Personnel and Human Resources services at the University. Additionally, we reached out to several employers who have previously engaged with our earlier research initiatives. The aim of this specialist team was to consolidate a set of benchmark criteria for devising a strategy plan for a graduated approach to soft skill development within the organization.

Participants

We adopted a targeted outreach strategy to gather participants for our collaborative session.

Initially, we identified potential attendees from within the university, notably key university personnel and students involved in the LevelUP program. Alongside this, we extended invitations to our broad external network of stakeholders. After contacting these identified individuals, we confirmed a group, N=6, encompassing professionals from HR, recruitment, and personnel selection; specialists in Higher Education with diverse roles ranging from enhancing soft skills, career training, to curriculum development and teaching; an employer with a strong background in HR processes; and a student trained in soft skills.

Co-creation workshop

The expert panel convened for a 2-hour session. Due to the distinct makeup and limited size of the group, the entirety of the session was conducted collectively, eliminating the need forsubgroups. The primary objective of the meeting was to explore potential frameworks, methodologies, and metrics relevant to the introduction and expansion of a tiered system for soft skills education within the university. The agenda encompassed both informative presentations and joint design discussions.

The group worked on potential options for introducing soft skills into higher education, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of each approach, resulting in 3 areas to focus on.

Soft skills integrated into the academic planning:

Pros:

• Universality: By integrating soft skills into the curriculum, it ensures that all students are exposed to these skills from the start.

• Practical applicability: Simulating real-life situations in the classroom provides a realistic context for students to practice soft skills.

• Adapted relevance: The focus group consensus suggests identifying specific skills relevant to each area of study.

Cons:

• Diversity of teacher skills: Not all teachers have developed soft skills, which can limit the effectiveness of teaching.

• Limited resources: There may not be enough resources to address all the desired soft skills.

Implementation:

Curriculum revision, real-life and role-play scenarios and feedback.

Soft skills as extracurricular formations:

Pros:

• Flexibility: Standalone workshops allow for adapting to different needs and learning paces.

• Innovation in teaching methods: Techniques such as escape rooms, mock job interviews, among others, are mentioned as means to teach soft skills.

Cons:

• Limited participation: If these workshops are voluntary, not all students might participate.

• Lack of integration: Skills learned in an extracurricular context might not integrate well with traditional academic skills.

Implementation:

Workshops and bootcamps, collaboration with experts and digital platforms.

Soft skills as something to teach the teachers so that they integrate them into their subjects:

Pros:

• Cascade effect: Training teachers can have a multiplier effect since each teacher can convey these skills to numerous students over time.

• Smooth integration: By equipping teachers with tools to teach soft skills, these skills can be integrated more organically into daily classes.

Cons:

• Variability in adoption: Depending on the predisposition and prior skills of the teacher, there might be significant variability in how and how effectively soft skills are taught.

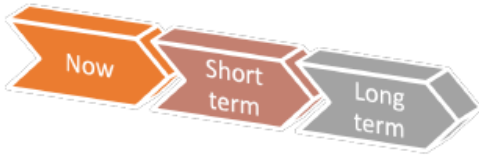
• Need for continuous training: Soft skills, like any other skillset, require updates and ongoing training to remain relevant and effective.

Implementation:

Teacher training programs, resource kits for educator, continuous professional development and support from the psychology department.

Results-Roadmap development

Considering three timeframes: immediate, short-term, and long-term, a collaborative roadmap is developed to integrate soft skills education into the university curriculum.



- Based on previous editions, integrate LEVEL-Up soft-skill courses as part of transversal (FoCo) classes offered by UJA in the 2023/2024 academic year. https://www.ujaen.es/estudios/oferta-academica/titulos-propios/programa-foco-generacion-uja
- Raise awareness for the potential impact of soft-skills for students' success in life https://redproem.es/2023/10/13/las-iniciativas-procare-digitas-daremos-proemo-proademo-y-level-up-protagonistas-en-sevilla-en-el-marco-del-dia-mundial-de-la-salud-mental/ &
- Disseminate soft-skills developed by LEVEL-Up among stakeholders and young people. https://redproem.es/2023/06/30/investigadores-de-la-uja-y-colaboradores-de-la-red-proem-subrayan-la-importancia-de-la-prevencion-y-la-promocion-de-la-salud-y-el-bienestar-emocional-de-las-personas-jovenes/ As a result, stakeholders from European and national agencies have sent letter of interests to UCY to have access to outputs.

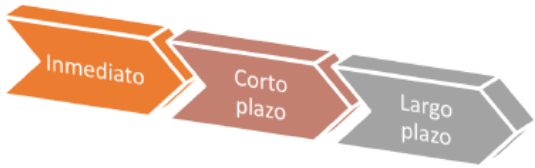
- Offer the soft-skill course to Psychological Service Center's users to enhance their wellbeing and life skills
- Introduce soft skills into Psychology degrees so students can benefit from theoretically grounded and practical content.

- Integrate social skills education into the ECTS university curriculum in collaboration with experts, stakeholders and digital platforms.
- Implement the LEVEL-Up app to facilitate basic and advanced skills for his/her success in life.

Figure 31

Resultados-Elaboración de la hoja de ruta

Teniendo en cuenta tres marcos temporales: inmediato, a corto plazo y a largo plazo, se elabora una hoja de ruta conjunta para integrar la formación en habilidades blandas en el plan de estudios universitario.



- Basándose en ediciones anteriores, integrar los cursos de habilidades blandas LEVEL-Up como parte de las lecciones transversales (FoCo) ofrecidas por la UJA en el año académico 2023/2024. https://www.ujaen.es/estudios/oferta-academica/titulos-propios/programa-foco-generacion-uja
- Aumentar la concienciación sobre el impacto potencial de las habilidades blandas para el éxito de los estudiantes en la vida https://redproem.es/2023/10/13/las-iniciativas-procare-digitas-daremos-proemo-proademo-y-level-up-protagonistas-en-sevilla-en-el-marco-del-dia-mundial-de-la-salud-mental/ &
- Difundir las soft-skills desarrolladas por LEVEL-Up entre las partes interesadas y los jóvenes. https://redproem.es/2023/06/30/investigadores-de-la-uja-y-colaboradores-de-la-red-proem-subrayan-la-importancia-de-la-prevencion-y-la-promocion-de-la-salud-y-el-bienestar-emocional-de-las-personas-jovenes/ Como consecuencia, las partes interesadas de las agencias europeas y nacionales han enviado cartas de interés a UCY para tener acceso a los resultados.

- Ofrecer el curso de habilidades blandas a los usuarios del Centro de Servicio Psicológico para mejorar su bienestar y sus habilidades para la vida.
- Introducir las habilidades blandas en las carreras de Psicología para que los estudiantes puedan beneficiarse de contenidos teóricos y prácticos.

- Integrar la educación en habilidades blandas en el plan de estudios universitarios ECTS en colaboración con expertos, partes interesadas y plataformas digitales.
- Implementar la app LEVEL-Up para facilitar las habilidades básicas y avanzadas para su éxito en la vida.

Figure 32

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1. Questionnaire Descriptive Results

Participants

Participants recruited via snowballing method. In total, 93 stakeholders from the four countries completed the survey.

The results of the closed questions are described below.

Item	M	SD
Students in HE education should be trained in soft skills as part of all compulsory modules	4.02	0.94
Soft skills training should receive ECS credits to motivate students to participate.	3.48	1.03
Soft skills training in HE should be optional.	2.77	1.10
Soft skills should be taught separately for intrapersonal skills and qualities (emotional regulation, stress-management) and for interpersonal skills (communication, team-work)	3.13	1.11
Soft skills' training can take place in large lecture theatres.	2.38	1.01
Working in small group is the best way of developing soft skills.	4.33	0.68
Employers should co-design soft-skill training with academic partners	3.78	0.87
Employers should be consulted more in terms of designing academic modules	3.53	0.98
Intrapersonal soft skills, such as stress management and self-reflection, should be mainly taught in HE in specialist modules.	3.28	0.99
Interpersonal soft skills, such as communication and teamwork should be included as elements in most HE modules not just in specialist modules.	4.08	0.69
HE instructors in general, should be trained and guided on how to teach and foster interpersonal skills for students during their course	4.3	0.63
Soft-skill training should be part of any key element of the UG curriculum such as the dissertation.	3.73	0.92

Soft-skill training should be included in any supervised practicum/work placement scheme by the university	4.01	0.77
Soft-skills can be better taught via specialist, inter-departmental modules across the university.	3.62	0.80
“Realistic simulations” of real-life conditions are essential features for effective soft skill training.	3.93	0.73

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