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## DEFINING, CLASSIFYING AND DEVELOPING SOFT SKILLS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: COMPETENCY-BASED AND HUMANISTIC APPROACHES

### **PROBLEMAS DE LA DEFINICIÓN, CLASIFICACIÓN Y DESARROLLO DE LAS HABILIDADES BLANDAS EN LA EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR EN EL CONTEXTO DE LOS ENFOQUES COMPETENTE Y HUMANISTA**

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#### ABSTRACT

The focus of this research is on the problem of paradoxical and ambiguous development of soft skills in the context of modern education. In present-day scientific discourse, soft skills are addressed from two perspectives representing the competency-based approach relying on the theory of human capital and the humanistic approach rooted in the concept of Bildung. The performed analysis suggests that the main difference between these positions can be found in their educational goals: to develop the student's soft skills for the sake of treating the student either as a means or as an end (by Kant's ethics). Modern educational theory and practice are characterized by the first approach: Universities are aimed at satisfying the needs of the labor market (in keeping with the knowledge-driven economy pressing for development of soft skills). The comparative analysis of the revealed viewpoints demonstrates limitations of the competency-based approach and suggests the importance of its humanization. The latter can be achieved, among other things, through refocusing from the human capital theory to the human capability approach.

**Keywords:** Competencies, educational philosophy, pedagogy, university, concept of Bildung, higher education.

#### RESUMEN

Este estudio va enfocado al problema de la paradoja y la ambigüedad del desarrollo de las habilidades blandas en el contexto de la educación moderna. Se demuestra que el examen de las habilidades blandas en el discurso científico contemporáneo se lleva a cabo desde dos posiciones: desde la posición del enfoque de competencia basado en la teoría del capital humano y desde la posición del enfoque humanista, cuyas bases son observables en el concepto de Bildung. En el transcurso del análisis, detectamos que la diferencia esencial de estas posiciones radica en sus objetivos educativos: desarrollar las habilidades blandas del estudiante en aras de la actitud con respecto al estudiante, ya sea como un medio o como un objetivo (desde el punto de vista de la ética de I. Kant). Es necesario señalar que en la práctica y teoría educativas contemporáneas prevalece precisamente el primer enfoque, cuando la tarea principal de las instituciones de educación superior es satisfacer las necesidades del mercado laboral. El análisis comparativo de las posiciones identificadas por los autores permitió argumentar las limitaciones del enfoque de competencia y llegar a la conclusión de la necesidad de su humanización, por ejemplo, reorientándolo de la teoría del capital humano a la teoría del potencial humano.

**Palabras clave:** Competencias, filosofía de la educación, pedagogía, Universidad, concepto Bildung, educación superior.

## INTRODUCTION

Topics addressing competencies, abilities, qualities, skills and their development are of timeless importance, for they can boost chances of career success and self-actualization (personal and professional).

The establishment of the economy ushered in by the Fourth Industrial Revolution, globalization and digitalization imposes new requirements on higher education. Job-specific, technical skills (hard skills) are no longer sufficient to ensure personal and professional success, unless they go hand in hand with social and emotional skills (soft skills).

The study of soft skills becomes relevant. The real breakthrough in this area started in the 1980s. We will mention only the most critical documents. The final report titled "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform" of the National Commission on Excellence in Education was a forerunner bringing the **21<sup>st</sup> century skills concept** into scientific practice. The concept of sustainable development came to the fore in the late 1980-s within the United Nations (UN) and now, given the increasing role of environmental issues, it is gaining more and more supporters. In 2015, the United Nations published Resolution 70/1 Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. According to this Resolution, education for sustainable development should be designed to lead to a more sustainable future and address all realms of sustainability (environment, society, economy).

The World Health Organization, Division of Mental Health (1994), proposed the concept of life skills as *"abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life. In particular, life skills are a group of psychosocial competencies and interpersonal skills that help people make informed decisions, solve problems, think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, build healthy relationships, empathise with others, and cope with and manage their lives in a healthy and productive manner"*. (p. 3)

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has been at the leading edge in studying skills and education at large. We will indicate only the most important documents: The report titled "21st Century Skills and Competences for New Millennium Learners in OECD Countries", 2009; "Skills for a Digital World", 2016; "European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations", 2017, in which 1384 skills required by the labor market are indicated. The European Union's initiatives are equally important: For example, "Europass"

documents and unifies skills and competencies for their verification in the EU and OECD countries, and "Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning".

The building of a common higher education space, following the Bologna Declaration, triggered the change in educational paradigms: from transmission of knowledge and developing job-specific skills to creating conditions for acquiring core competencies (integrating knowledge, abilities and skills).

Implementing the competency-based approach, UN, EU, OECD and others regularly announce all-encompassing initiatives aimed at satisfaction of the pressing demand of the transforming reality for specialists who are able to withstand new challenges. The competency-based approach, as opposed to the concept of acquisition of knowledge (as a set of information), places emphasis on competencies guiding our actions in new, uncertain, ambiguous environments we are not ready to deal with, i.e. core competencies of the future, which analysts of the World Economic Forum assign to soft skills (Osipova, et al., 2019).

In the competency-based approach, soft skills are addressed in the context of uniform requirements for training, assessment and development of human resources. These requirements imply an anti-humanist approach suggesting that a human being is perceived as a means (a resource) rather than an end-in-himself (from the viewpoint of Kant's ethics), while the development of his inner potential is important for increasing his value on the job market rather than for his self-actualization.

Therefore, our study focuses on at the problem of paradoxicality and ambiguity of soft skills developing in higher education settings. Aim of this theoretical article is to look at this problem through a prism of comparative analysis of the competency-based and humanistic approaches from the perspective of the human capital and the concept of Bildung.

## DEVELOPMENT

The analysis of subject-related literature shows that up to now there is not commonly accepted precise and concise definition of the term "soft skills."

There are different definitions of soft skills, different methods of their classification and clustering. Furthermore, the term "soft skills" is often used interchangeably with such labels as "21<sup>st</sup> century skills" (in OECD documentation) or future work skills 2020. Although the term has become a buzzword in political, social-political and popular

scientific discourses, the definition lacks consistency, as it has different semantic content, depending on the national and cultural context. In the United Kingdom, the terms “life skills”, “core skills”, “key skills” are frequently used in addition, or in preference to, the term “soft skills”. In the Commonwealth realms, Australia and New Zealand, – “employability skills” or “generic skills” are used. In the United States they prefer to talk about “basic skills” and “necessary skills” (Cornalli, 2018). In Spanish-speaking countries, the terms “competencias genéricas” (“competencias transversales”), “habilidades blandas” are practiced. In Russian education, soft skills are frequently associated with universal competencies.

When describing soft skills, some scientists identify them with particular personality traits and attributes. For example, Robles (2012); and Magogwe, et al. (2014), in fact equate soft skills with interpersonal communication skills. And Verma (2013), correlates soft skills with the Emotional Intelligence Quotient (EQ), while hard skills – with the Intelligence Quotient (IQ).

Later, the broader definition of soft skills, free of their narrowing down to personality parameters, gained popularity. So, Cinque (2017), gives the following definition, “*Soft skills represent a dynamic combination of cognitive and meta-cognitive skills, interpersonal, intellectual and practical skills. Soft skills help people to adapt and behave positively so that they can deal effectively with the challenges of their professional and everyday life*” (p. 85). Let’s take this definition as a working one.

Soft skills, as opposed to hard skills, cannot be clearly differentiated due to their interrelationship and connection with individual characteristics of people; however, this did not prevent numerous attempts of their classification. The diversity of classifications is generated by numerous criteria that are selected depending on scientific and practical purposes of scholars.

In the classification offered by the Italian affiliate of ManpowerGroup (2014), soft skills were arranged with the help of the identified matrix where the rows showed different fields of competencies (cognitive, realization, social, emotional) and the columns listed different organizational roles (operational, manager, executive). A more justified and customary approach in building classifications incorporates perspectives of interested parties and companies: employers (regarding job market prospects and demands), experts representing the interests of national and international institutions, and scientists from different branches of knowledge, etc.

Most frequently, soft skills are identified by being arranged into 2-3 clusters. Following experts in this field (Raitskaya

& Tikhonova, 2019), the authors of the article have noticed that three clusters included in most of the classifications prevail: (1) social and communicative skills (communicative skills, interpersonal skills, teamwork and leadership, social intellect, responsibility, ethics of communication); (2) cognitive skills (critical thinking, problem-solving skills, innovative thinking, intellectual load management skills, skills of learning, information skills, time management skills); (3) personal attributes and emotional intellect (emotional intellect, integrity, optimism and positive thinking, flexibility, creativity, motivation, empathy). (p. 355)

Undoubtedly, these three categories are always interlinked, therefore their separation is conditional. The significance of these numerous classifications, the number of which will increase over time, should not be underestimated: “*They provide a systematic and rationally ordered list of attributes that would otherwise be a formless mass*”. (Cornalli, 2018, p. 965)

On the other hand, they should not be substantiated, as they are merely a model, an “ideal type” as defined by M. Weber. They are useful as a working tool, but they should be continuously revised to be aligned with the “liquid modernity” (by Z. Bauman). The national and cultural dimensions can also have a substantial effect on creating and selecting taxonomies. It is not surprising: Different cultures value (emphasize) different qualities and attributes included in the list of soft skills.

Most generally, soft skills are defined through their opposition to hard skills. Terms of hard skills and soft skills came to life by association with the computer terms “hardware” (physical, tangible parts or components of the computer) and “software” (instructions, data or programs used to operate computers) and later on, were extrapolated from economic and business dimensions into social sectors.

Initially, it was believed that hard skills should play a leading role in this dyad; their development was the top priority in higher vocational education. In the meantime, the survey conducted by Harvard University, the **Carnegie Foundation** and Stanford Research Center concluded that only 15-25% of job success comes from technical skills and knowledge or hard skills, and 75-85% of job success comes from having well-developed soft skills (Robles, 2012). The findings of the three-year research “Skills for Social Progress: The Power of Social and Emotional Skills”, included in the report of OECD Skills Studies (France. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015) also demonstrate that it is social, emotional and other personal qualities of students (rather than their academic achievement, as it was believed earlier) that are essential for their life satisfaction,

career success and overall wellbeing. Thus, we can offer the following definition (brief and comprehensive): Soft skills are supra-disciplinary, supra-professional skills and competencies that can be used in any profession and everyday life.

The recognized importance of soft skills has changed fundamentally the entire system of Western higher education in the last 20 years. "As for Russian universities," Gruzdev, et al. (2018), describe, "*most of them are still focused primarily on the formation of future professional (hard) competences, despite the fact that the leading role in individual and corporate professional achievements in the modern postindustrial society is provided by "super-structural" (soft) skills*" (p. 696).

On the other hand, one can clearly see that in recent years Russian higher education institutions, and the Ural Federal University (UrFU) in particular, have been increasingly re-focusing their attention on development of soft skills. The illustrative example of the above trend is the **Center for the Development of Universal Competencies** (hereinafter – the Center) opened at the university. Its objectives include theoretical work in studying approaches to development of soft skills, values and mindset of present-day students, including specific features of information perception, as well as practical work in creating and implementing educational methods. Apparently, traditional lectures are of little use in teaching how to negotiate, to speak in public, to work in a team or to offer creative solutions. Therefore, there is an urgent need for new pedagogical design tools and patterns, for training techniques, and for teachers of a new format. The novel educational technologies bring tangible results: improved students' motivation and involvement in the learning process. This trend has been demonstrated by minor or additional courses, which students choose at their own discretion. The Center is the all-time leader in the most popular minors: Personal Effectiveness, Art of Public Speaking, Negotiations, Soft Skills from ROSATOM Nuclear Energy Corporation. The Center does not limit the scope of its activities to educational tasks.

The Center has prepared and tried out the professional development program "Soft Skills for Teachers", where teachers learn how to design courses to meet present-day requirements, how to manage the group dynamics, how to motivate students and get them involved in the learning process. Current trends observed in today's universities show that they are increasingly interested in going beyond their boundaries, in setting a regional agenda and building an ecosystem promoting interaction among business, government and education. Besides, in the present-day social reality, the university diploma does not mean that education is over. Graduates will have to change a lot of

jobs and go through a great deal of retraining. Therefore, the Center works closely with employers, participates in joint programs, runs training courses for public employees.

Practical and theoretical activities of the Center highlighted the underlying internal contradiction that escaped attention of many scholars.

On the one hand, soft skills serve the purpose of setting education on the **mercantilist track**, which is captured by the respective vocabulary typical of the business world: goals, objectives, competence, efficiency, educational services, customers, etc. On the other hand, we cannot deny the intrinsic connection between soft skills and the humanistic domain interested in developing a person as a bearer of cultural, national, social knowledge and skills; a person who is responsible and capable of independent thinking and acting. Thus, learning soft skills is self-contradictory at the root. Soft skills imply development of a person's creative potential, self-dependence, autonomy, and at the same time they are focused on meeting needs of globalized knowledge economy (Howard, 2018; Hilt, et al., 2019). A student has an opportunity to develop critical thinking, but within certain limitations – the limitations that pose a challenge to the political and economic status quo. This approach to critical thinking (and to other constituents of soft skills) has little, if anything, to do with the ideals promoted by pedagogical ideas of J. Dewey and P. Freire.

It would be naïve to see extensive promotion of soft skills as revival of the concept of *Bildung* on new grounds. *Bildung* is a concept of philosophy of education; it is rooted in the Greek philosophy (*paideia*) and was revived during the German new humanism in the 18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> century. It laid the foundation for educational reforms initiated by Wilhelm von Humboldt, who exerted a strong influence on the conceptual design of the model of classical university. "*He emphasized that education was meant to help an individual to come to himself, to achieve his intrinsic potential, to implement his attitude towards the world*" (Shutaleva, et al., 2019, p. 34). Of course, "*the idealized visions of reformers of the 19th century regarding the mission and the purpose of the university did not protect the actual practice against the dictates of the time*" (Gilyazova & Zamoshchanskaya, 2019, p. 180)

*Bildung* refers to a person's development and self-cultivation throughout his life; it is not limited to training of particular skills and competencies. In this respect, the concept of *Bildung*, despite its considerable age, is as progressive and advanced as the present-day competency-based approach that borrowed a great deal from this concept (for example, the idea of continuous education). The difference between soft and hard skills suggests an analogy with G. W. F. Hegel's difference between *Bildung* and

Erziehung. While Bildung implies harmonization of the mind and heart, ethical and emotional maturity, development of such qualities as comprehension, self-awareness, reflection, wisdom; training (Erziehung) involves acquisition of specific knowledge having instrumental value. Yet, the similarity between the concept of Bildung and the competency-based approach does not mean that they are compatible. The above viewpoints are confronted through the dichotomies: humanism/ neoliberalism, civil society/ the state, national identity/ globalization (Rowson, 2019). Of course, it is a simplified representation. But the main difference between these positions can be found in their educational goals.

From the perspective of the concept of Bildung, the goal of education is to implement Kant's (1977), Formula of Humanity: *"Man and generally any rational being exists as an end in himself, not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will, but in all his actions, whether they concern himself or other rational beings, must be always regarded at the same time as an end"*. (p. 45)

The competency-based approach encourages an individual's development for a different purpose: to meet the needs of knowledge economy, where that individual acts as an effective production resource.

*"To put the argument to the edge: while social and emotional abilities previously was promoted in order to ensure human cultivation and personal development in a lifelong perspective, the same skills are now promoted to ensure the production of human capital for economic prosperity"*. (Hilt, et al., 2019, p. 393)

The person is seen as a means. Any discussion of soft skills in Russian and foreign literature is held in the rhetoric of human capital theory (Kuzminov, et al., 2019; Hilt, et al., 2019), in which *"the human being is viewed as an asset that creates economic utility exceeding the expenses needed to develop and maintain it"* (Kuzminov, et al., 2019, p. 20). In Howard's (2018), opinion, "the unfortunate use of the term human capital to describe teachers is characteristic of a de-personalized, de-humanized concern, as people are means to an identifiable end. Instrumental rationalism that is concerned primarily with means and not ends should be tempered by ethics, practical wisdom and morality". (p. 11)

Antecedents of the human capital theory can be found in works of W. Petty and A. Smith. A. Marshall placed a strong emphasis on a person as the most important means of production. In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, due to the works of such scholars as B. A. Weisbrod, J. Mincer, B. Hansen and others, this theory was set apart into a separate scientific branch. In the 1960s, Gary Becker,

Theodore Schultz, Edward Denison, and the above Jacob Mincer developed an empirically founded model.

In this theory, they described mechanisms, through which educational investment could boost economic growth. The offered model was used as the underlying concept in the policy aimed at increasing investment in education across the globe. However, as Kuzminov, et al. (2019), note, *"there were other reasons to invest in education. Among them were the need to foster civic literacy among the population as a means of stabilizing the political system, the desire to support social mobility, the project of building a nation state, and the social necessity of caring for children and youth"*. (p. 21)

The theory of human capital demonstrated its use in discussion of the impact of education on employment. Initially, employability was seen as the match between the attributes of graduates and specific needs of the labor market. To some extent, this viewpoint continues to exist, though in recent years "employability" has been positioned as a separate skill (included in soft skills) or as a set of skills. The truth is that the reality makes its adjustments and challenges the hypothesis underlying the human capital theory and asserting a positive relationship between formal education and an individual graduate's prospects on the labor market in terms of employment guarantees and the level of earnings. In Russia, the grounds for questioning the above assumption are more justified, thus contributing to further devaluation of higher education.

The problems extend beyond the micro-level. The macro-level presents a problem of "undercapitalized human potential" in education: The economic growth is slowing down (in individual countries and globally), though investment in education is increasing. Russia, like dozens of other countries, has fallen victim to the "middle income trap", in which the growth of the education system does not result in the expected growth of productivity (Kuzminov, et al., 2019).

In this way, reasoning about insignificance of education for economic growth and individual success turns into arguments for implementation of political decisions aimed at reduction in budget allocations to education.

In its turn, the theory of human capital is also severely criticized for disregarding institutional and structural problems in economy. In the meantime, as Kuzminov, et al. (2019), point out, this criticism (escalating into discrediting attempts) is often unfair, because *"discussions of the link between education and economic growth often miss out on the fact that education systems in most of the world, including Russia, developed in ways that diverged from classical human capital theory"*. (p. 22)

Faultfinders tend to neglect that relationships between economy and education are much deeper and more sophisticated than simple linear correlations. Furthermore, the arguments against the substantial contribution of education in the economic success of an individual person or country are frequently based on formal indicators (the number of years spent on learning, the grade point average in the certificate or diploma, etc.) applicable to hard skills; they brush off content-related characteristics (soft skills). To a large extent, it can be explained by difficulties associated with formal evaluation of soft skills.

Nevertheless, it should be admitted that it was the criticism of the theory that made its supporters not only acknowledge the transformation of the role (following the changing trends of modern times) of individual elements of human capital (hard and soft skills), but also look at the mechanisms, through which they can be capitalized in economy.

*“Without this, the growth of “undercapitalized human potential” is inevitable, and we will continue to see people with valuable skills who are not fully integrated into the economy, are unable to find jobs, or do not have the skills necessary to grow in a way that would benefit themselves and society as a whole.”* (Kuzminov, et al., 2019, p. 25)

It was found that soft skills provide the highest return on the human capital. Thus, it should be stated that attempts to humanize (in the Kantian meaning) education can rarely withstand collision with reality, revealing their highly idealistic nature. Even the Scandinavian education system that is based on the ideology of social democratic progressivism and *Bildung* has to move away from their ideas (Hilt, et al., 2019). It is easier and more realistic to reconsider the role of personality in economic growth by overcoming the perception of an individual as a “widget” (from “*which it*”), important, but replaceable cog in a market machine – in other words, to move from the theory of human capital to the idea of human potential as a combination of physical and mental capabilities, which can be used for achieving not only an individual's instrumental goals, but also his existential goals including extension of potentialities and possibilities of his self-actualization (Stepanova & Zeer, 2019).

To summarize, the panoramic review of soft skills allowed us to establish five key aspects.

1. The Fourth Industrial Revolution and the resulting digital transformation of education set new objectives. The primary objective is to meet the demand of the global knowledge economy for soft skills – indispensable skills of the 21st century. Soft skills will help students grow into

creatively and critically thinking professionals who are digitally literate and competent in effective cooperation and communication, etc. The above skills are developed within the competency-based learning refocusing the education paradigm from acquisition of knowledge to the ability to use it. The new paradigm shifts priority to students' participation in the learning process, while lecturers adopt the role of facilitators of learning rather than knowledge creators and disseminators. Two millennia ago, Plutarch insisted on the importance of such learning: “*Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire*” (quoted by Gómez-Ejerique & López-Cantos, 2019, p. 53). Today, this concept of the learning process is becoming dominant.

2. Addressing soft skills in their opposition to hard skills is methodologically justified, though in education their interrelationship should not be neglected: The development of soft skills should be carried out in parallel with the process of subject-based training or through the potential of particular disciplines. Scholars point out that the attempts to organize individual training courses for development of soft skills outside disciplinary contexts were of little success; their development combined with studying professional disciplines turns out to be more efficient. At the same time, “*formal knowledge and competences obtained in the education system work much more effectively if they are supplemented by certain personal qualities of students, which the education system can not measure*” (Gruzdev, et al., 2018, pp. 696-697). Thus, it is not necessary to dichotomically contrast soft and hard skills in real educational practice.

3. Universality is a distinctive feature of soft skills constituting both dispositions and attributes that can be extended to numerous professional situations and areas, though in different national and cultural contexts the same soft skills can have different significance and purpose. Further studies in this area have high potential.

4. Soft skills studies should be free of reductionism – the intention to limit the development of soft skills to meeting needs of labor markets. It is necessary to consider their intrinsic humanistic message: Focusing on self-actualization, active participation in civic life, social cohesion, sustainable development, etc.

5. The priority is given to interests of the global knowledge economy rather than to the person as an end-in-himself, as an absolute value. If we apply E. Fromm's theory, we can say that soft skills in the competency-based approach are required so that the person could “Have”, while the humanistic approach promotes them so that the person could “Be”. According to Howard (2018), who used the work of the philosopher John McMurtry, we have

an opposition between the life code of value and money code value in educational sphere. These reflections help us think more deeply about the ultimate ends of a 21st century education.

## CONCLUSIONS

The performed study showed that the 21<sup>st</sup> century educational system (both in Russia and in western countries) is largely based on the human capital theory and is primarily aimed at preparing students for successful competition on the global labor market. So, the educational transformation of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is performed within the framework of the market-driven, competition-focused neoliberal ideology and is aimed at its strengthening. Therefore, despite the profound educational reforms in Russia and in other countries, it is difficult to speak about substantial rethinking of the goal and essence of education.

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