



Final report

IO2 Effect: Mapping soft skills with employability

The most desirable soft skills among job applicants

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ESSENCE: IO2 Effect: Mapping soft skills with employability



Enhance Soft Skills to Nurture Competitiveness and Employability: ESSENCE

<http://projectessence.eu/>



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Part no 1. Tools & Good Practices

Already at the beginning of the 20th century, attention was paid to the growing importance of soft skills among job candidates. W. Lanthaler and J. Zugmann in the book "ME Campaigne. A New Way of Thinking About Career" many times stressed that specialists without social competences have no future¹. More than 20 years have passed since the publication of this book, social competences are undoubtedly needed and it is more and more visible that young people entering the labor market lack these skills (this is confirmed by both representatives of HR departments in various studies and basic research conducted as part of the Essence project). Unfortunately, the first place in the recruitment process is still mainly occupied by hard, technical skills, those focused on the requirements of a given positions. Meanwhile, HR representatives emphasize the importance of soft skills, which are most valued at the managerial level or in professions where cooperation with the client is the basis.

The observations presented in this part of the report do not have any scientific evidence, but are based on extremely important opinions of company representatives who expressed their opinions through a specially prepared online form and/or in-depth interviews. Based on this information, the following conclusions should be made:

- at the recruitment stage, the assessment of whether the candidate has appropriate soft skills (or not) is based on observing the person during the interview. There is no evidence that companies carry out (or are exceptions) special competence tests that show what competences (and at what level) a given candidate is characterized by, although the examples presented later in the report show interesting solutions in this area, but in the context of employees,
- in the case of employees of a given organization, the most common form of evaluation is the regular observation of the employee's behavior during the performance of duties by the immediate supervisor, as well as the employee's self-assessment in the hope that he will correctly recognize the areas in which he shows gaps (in terms of soft skills and even technical skills). In this aspect, several solutions are also worth mentioning, suggesting a departure from traditional forms of assessment or competence development,
- universities, which attach importance to equipping their graduates with soft skills, mostly do it informally through additional courses, trainings or workshops, activities enabling the development of soft skills. The deserving attention are career offices/centers (university units), which play an invaluable role in the process of adapting candidates to the realities of the market (both in terms of content (directly or indirectly) and in practice, offering courses or meetings with industry representatives).

As confirmed by the analyzes carried out by the Essence project consortium, the availability of information in secondary sources on the topic of the need for soft skills by employers is still low. Even if any action is taken in this direction, companies do not share this information. Most often, information on the essence of development, supporting this development and certain priorities resulting from employment in a given company (regarding both technical skills and soft skills) is written very generally in the "career" tab on the website of each of the larger companies or portals with job offers.

This part of the report has been divided into three sections summarizing the work of the ESSENCE project consortium enriched with interesting examples illustrating the relationship between soft skills and employability in the economy and from a higher education perspective. The first section focuses on the

¹ Lanthaler W., Zugmann J. (2000). Akcja Ja, nowy sposób myślenia o karierze (ME Campaigne. Action me. A new way of thinking about career), Twigger, Warszawa.

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implementation of highly advanced research strategies and the valorization of soft skills, showing the activities undertaken in the field of research and evaluation of the possessed soft skills. The second section of this part of the report indicates the activities undertaken in the area of recognizing, shaping and developing soft skills of employees. The third section of this document shows examples of actions taken by higher education institutions, universities, which allow to fill the gap in the soft skills education system at this level of education, which can be serve as a model for other units.

1. The implementation of highly advanced soft skills research and valorization strategies in industry sector

We can easily find many examples of companies that attach great importance to soft skills. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to find examples of actions they take to verify/test soft skills of employees or candidates (potential employees). From the perspective of all countries represented by the project consortium, the picture is the same - the assessment of soft skills of employees (regardless of the represented sector of the economy) turns out to be a huge problem. Experience and available information show that the most popular method is employee self-assessment, despite the fact that there are many interesting methods and tools for assessing the level of soft skills.

The general conversations with representatives of HR departments lead to a clear conclusion - if soft skills are one of the elements influencing the recruitment process, they are only verified by observing the behavior and discussion with a candidate during an interview with the company's representative. Soft skills are important, but not as much as professional skills. It is not much better with the evaluation of the soft skills of employees. Self-assessment or the annual assessment of an employee made by a manager/supervisor is the most popular element of assessing the level of competences of a given employee, however, it is primarily used to verify gaps and identify training needs, much less often (or only indirectly) is prepared for testing and assessing the level of soft skills.

Most of the solutions that can be used in the strategies of research and valorization the level of soft skills of workers require time and effort to be properly implemented. Demanding projects often discourage their implementation, but the implementation of these projects by appropriate units or external companies may take this burden off the management and allow the implementation of effective staff development activities in enterprises. Below are presenting some examples of how many different tools can be used to test and evaluate the level of soft skills represented by individual employees.

Based on the available secondary sources, it is extremely difficult to define and describe the details of the various tools used to test and assess the level of soft skills. There is no information regarding, among others the content of knowledge tests or other tools assessing the level of soft skills is probably due to the nature of the business, including the know-how owned by the company (which it does not want to share). Nevertheless, it is worth recalling individual solutions to extend the perspective of available tools and activities with good practices from the market.

An example of a good template in recognizing and development soft skills is **National School of Judiciary and Public Prosecution (Poland)**. This entity implements the project titled "Implementation of modern methods of testing training needs and education as the key to an effective justice system". One of main assumption was to enable the staff of the judiciary and prosecution examining the level of soft skills and

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managing them. To achieve this goal in January 2020, was launched a training platform - e-KSSiP². e-KSSiP is an innovative online recruitment tool, service and evaluation of stationary training, implementation of e-learning training, communication and exchange of experiences. Most of all, it is a tool allowing for an independent diagnosis of the degree of fulfillment of the required soft skills and enabling their further development through a new module for improving Users' competences. First of all, User can create competence profile. Then, the user can make an individual diagnosis of competences by comparing the acquired ones results with the requirements of the workplace. Thanks to that, in a way ensuring complete anonymity, the User can obtain in a short time information on the areas and competences that should be improved and a proposal of adequately selected training.

In turn, **MT Consulting (Poland)**³ has a wide range of tools used to test and assess the level of soft skills. Although the company provides services strictly related to the recognition of training needs and training for other companies, it is an example of an entity offering appropriately selected research tools and systematized paths of human resources development. A proper analysis of training needs brings the necessary knowledge in this field. This case shows how many different tools (from the most obvious to completely innovative ones) can be used to assess the level of soft skills, in order to adapt the training to the needs of the employee in the next stage.

In order to identify skills development needs, the company uses fully **anonymous surveys**, which are the starting point for further analysis. The initial **diagnosis of needs, limitations and problems** using the "**Training Needs Diagnosis Sheet**" is aimed at specific positions. The spreadsheet specifies the competencies required for a given job position as well as the skills or competences currently possessed by employees at the surveyed job positions. An additional tool that allows the company to examine the skills/competences of employees are **employee assessments tool**, made on the basis of monitoring the effectiveness of employees and observing them in their daily work. The next step in the analysis are **consultations with lower and management level employees, focus groups** and the exchange of experiences and conclusions that allow us to learn about the problems faced by employees. Customer opinions are also an extremely valuable source of information, therefore **customer satisfaction surveys** and the "**secret client**" **technique** allow you to verify the errors, weaknesses and quality of employees' work, as well as how they cope with the daily customer service (including those the most demanding). Positive opinions and recommendations available on the company's website allow to state that all proposed activities fulfill their given role. Various (including unconventional) tools for assessing employee competencies allow for a detailed analysis of the elements requiring improvement and, consequently, the improvement of the processes taking place in the surveyed company.

By undertaking activities in the field of research and development of soft skills of employees, companies usually redirect responsibility to their own HR departments. An interesting solution is proposed by the **Ferrero Group**⁴, an Italian company that has achieved international success. The company has set up a spin-off called **Learning Lab Ferrero** to research and develop best practices for talent acquisition and career development for Ferrero employees. As part of one of initiatives called as the "HR Ferrero Way", an internal monitoring and evaluation model was proposed. In addition, the very "soul" of Learning Lab Ferrero is represented by **Ferrero Corporate University** and **Ferrero Professional Academy** - two different initiatives

² e-KSSiP platform: <https://www.kSSIP.gov.pl/node/7365> (Accessed: 15.07.2021).

³ MT Consulting website: <https://mtc.pl/analiza-potrzeb-szkoleniowych/> (Accessed: 15.07.2021).

⁴ La Responsabilità Sociale di Ferrero – Le Persone [Ferrero's CSR – People], available at: <https://www.static.ferrero.com/glob-alcms/documenti/2125.pdf> (Accessed: 01.07.2021).

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-serving the same mission, i.e. empowering employees in terms of managerial competences and soft skills, as referred to in the second section of this material.

The Ferrero example shows that having a dedicated unit for research and development of soft skills should be part of companies' human resource management activities. The examples given in this document are good practices that inspire entities that do not undertake activities in the field of assessing and developing soft skills of employees. Conducting interviews, surveys and testing is already the first step to adjusting activities aimed at developing paths for the development of soft skills of employees of a given organization. Among the less obvious tools for assessing the level of soft skills, **gamification** should be mentioned, well-prepared (i.e. with an appropriate history, storytelling) allows the participant to be involved and is a good and effective tool for assessing (diagnosis) the level of soft skills, but also their subsequent development. For example, the **SKILLATO platform**⁵ operated by **the Zucchetti Group (Italy)**, using mobile technology, offers gamification to improve the efficiency and commitment of the company's employees. By carrying out a series of activities, it is possible to measure the level and develop the soft skills of the people involved in an activity.

There are also companies that offer services to enterprises that allow them to easily assess and train their employees in the necessary soft skills competences. Such example is the **Spanish company Foxize**⁶ - based on the use of digital technology, the company is dedicated to continuous, customisable and accessible training offers to other companies and their employees which, **based on the results of the initial test**, adjust the subject of training necessary to improve the competences of individual employees. This is an interesting example with regard to the tools a company can use to assess and develop their employees' soft skills. Foxize offers clients (users) the opportunity to take an introductory test that will measure their level of soft skills based on a series of questions divided into different areas such as: innovation mindset, productivity, professional development, creativity dynamics, effective communication, effective leadership, team management and personal brand. After completing the test, the answers are analyzed, after that the user receives information about the overall result obtained and the ratio of the results obtained in each category. After identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the employee/user, Foxize offers a number of tools in its field of work, training, in order to both acquire and develop those skills in which the user obtained lower scores. In addition, users can compare the individual result with the average of other trainees who previously took the test and determine what level they are in relation to the rest of the market and the competition.

To sum up, it should be stated that the range of tools that can be used to assess the level of soft skills is extremely wide. In the case of traditional and most popular activities allowing to assess the level of soft skills of employees, i.e. self-assessment tools, direct conversation or assessment made by the superior, there is a risk of obtaining unreliable results, which is caused by a subjective assessment or the desire to cover up one's own imperfections. Other factors of failure of undertaken actions (or lack of them) include probably low commitment of management, as well as poor involvement of employees in the undertaken initiatives. However, the success of applying the strategy of measuring and developing soft skills can be found in a wide range of tools that can be used to assess the level of soft skills of employees.

⁵ SKILLATO website: <https://www.skillato.com/> (Accessed: 01.07.2021).

⁶ Foxize website: https://www.foxize.com/?subcategoria=84&ciudad=&form_id=filtro_rapido&tab=cursos (Accessed: 01.07.2021).

2. Study and systematization of development paths

The company's priority should be not only to attract and retain employees, but also to raise their qualifications. Only a thorough analysis of needs allows for effective decision making in the context of planning and implementing activities aimed at employee development, which in turn builds the company's competitiveness on the market⁷.

Fortunately, the need to educate soft skills is recognized in more and more industries. Good practice examples presented by the project consortium represent, inter alia, the financial sector⁸, the health sector⁹, and tourism. They concern both private and public sector entities. Rapidly changing business needs and a dynamically developing market mean that people responsible for human resources departments have to update the offered development programs on an ongoing basis. Often the preparation of training plans is done in collaboration with HR and department managers. This is a good method to work out the best solutions.

Developing soft skills of employees is a factor that guarantees a competitive advantage of enterprises. For this reason, companies organize various types of training that allow their participants to develop skills useful at work, such as effective communication, problem-free conflict resolution, time management skills, coping with stress and emotional intelligence. Traditional training is not everything. The modern market of services in this area offers a modern approach to competence development, where training takes place both on site and outside, online, or takes the form of coaching, personal and professional support sessions, simulation games and other attractive forms of expanding knowledge and develop the skills examples of which are provided in this section.

Companies such as **Foxize (Spain)**¹⁰ or **Cesop HR Consulting Company (Italy)**¹¹ prove that effective training should start with an initial identification of needs. In the case of **Foxize** it is, among others a **pre-test** measuring the level of soft skills. Based on its results, the content of the training is adjusted according to the weaker areas identified in a given employee. **Cesop HR Consulting Company** also adjusts the content of the training to the needs identified at the initial stage, then training takes place in focus groups. The meetings are divided into two stages: (1) helping participants to recognize their strengths and weaknesses and (2) presenting examples to support change.

The SKILLATO platform (Zucchetti Group, Italy)¹², already mentioned during the assessment of the level of soft skills, is another interesting initiative using modern tools supporting the development of soft skills - online gamification. Gamification is adjusted to the competency goals defined for a given organization, engages staff in a number of activities that allow them to develop new skills necessary for a given job. Participants are rewarded for their progress, because the tool, apart from the educational aspect, allows the assessment of the initial level, and thus changes during the gamification process.

⁷ Laurisz M. (2021). Kompetencje przyszłości potrzebne już dziś, wynika z raportu ManpowerGroup., ITReseller. Available at: <https://itreseller.com.pl/kompetencje-przyszlosci-potrzebne-w-firmach-juz-dzis-jakie-umiejtnosci-sa-kluczowe-dla-organizacji-w-dobiej-rewolucji-technologicznej/> (Accessed: 01.07.2021).

⁸ AVUS d.o.o.: <https://www.avus.hr/specijalizirane-edukacije/> (Accessed: 01.07.2021).

⁹ Bagatin Polyclinic: <https://www.poliklinikabagatin.hr/O-nama/Bagatin-Akademija> (Accessed: 01.07.2021). Bagatin Academy: <https://bagatinakademija.hr/> (Accessed: 01.07.2021).

¹⁰ Foxize website: https://www.foxize.com/?subcategoria=84&ciudad=&form_id=filtro_rapido&tab=cursos (Accessed: 01.07.2021).

¹¹ Cesop HR Consulting Company website: <https://www.cesop.it/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/TALENT-DEVELOPMENT.pdf> (Accessed: 01.07.2021).

¹² SKILLATO website: <https://www.skillato.com/> (Accessed: 01.07.2021).

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The Italian Ferrero¹³ among the key activities and forms of supporting soft skills activities aimed at breaking the routine and the prevailing habits, in order to trigger creative thinking and innovation. Organizational activities foster the emergence of new behavioral models that are both people-centered and innovation-driven. Organizational activities foster the emergence of new behavioral models that are both people-centered and innovation-driven. Companies focused on developing their employees' soft skills offer **internal training platforms or centers** that are created to support the culture of learning, developing competences, and sharing knowledge - **Ferrero Corporate University**, which offers advanced training programs in strategic problem solving, people management, negotiation skills, team management and teamwork or the basics of project management. Other examples of this kind of initiatives are the ventures of the **Croatian institutions INA Academy with e-INA Academy**¹⁴ (INA d.d., fuel industry) and **HEP Akademija**¹⁵ (HEP d.d., national energy company). INA Academy is an internal knowledge exchange platform operating since 2016, supporting the culture of learning, skills development and sharing knowledge and experience, enriched with the e-INA platform from 2019, it also allows participants to test the acquired knowledge before and after the training. In turn, the initiative of HEP d.d. is an internal training center established by the HR department in 2019, offering the company's employees programs in the field of, among others, communication skills, effective communication with clients, and managing stress and time.

At **Coca-Cola HBC**¹⁶ (the third largest Coca-Cola bottler in the world, headquartered in Switzerland, but also in other European countries), the Performance for Growth (P4G) strategy was introduced. The initiative uses a **dedicated application and innovative IT tools**, thus encouraging the continuous and multidirectional sharing of information, exchange of good practices, and validation of experimental models for improving qualifications. In addition, as part of this initiative, measures are taken to assess the level and development of soft skills of employees with the **involvement of experienced staff** – it is among others **creating coaching plans and career paths, consultation sessions** in which experienced employees test their younger colleagues during individual sessions to better support them in using their potential as future leaders. In addition, the organization hosts talent screening meetings with different frequency and regular 'performance calibration sessions' where 'young' employees can have an open discussion with their mentors, inviting them to review their activities, evaluate their effectiveness and brainstorm about possible key areas of intervention. The whole initiative is conceived as a macro-scale coaching plan aimed at identifying the most appropriate career and promotion path for young people.

Among the activities used to identify the needs of soft skills education, one can also mention those related to **the evaluation of work for the previous year or the study of the needs of employees**, the so-called **self-**

¹³ La Responsabilità Sociale di Ferrero – Le Persone [Ferrero's CSR – People], available at: <https://www.static.ferrero.com/glob-alcms/documenti/2125.pdf> (Accessed: 01.07.2021).

¹⁴ INA d.d. official web site: <https://www.ina.hr/en/> (Accessed: 01.07.2021). Odgovorno (2020). INA Akademija – interno dijeljenje znanja u stalnom razvoju. Available at: <https://odgovorno.hr/dop-price/ina-akademija-interno-dijeljenje-znanja-u-stalnom-razvoju/> (Accessed: 01.07.2021).

Selectio (2020). INA, d.d. i šestdruštava INA Grupe nagrađeno priznanjem izvrsnost u izazovima. Available at: <https://www.selectio.hr/ina-d-d-i-sest-drustava-ina-grupe-nagradeno-priznanjem-izvrsnost-u-izazovima/> (Accessed: 01.07.2021).

¹⁵ HEP d.d. official website: <https://www.hep.hr/> (Accessed: 01.07.2021), https://www.hep.hr/UserDocsImages//dokumenti/vjesnik/2019//2_2019.pdf (Accessed: 01.07.2021) and https://www.hep.hr/UserDocsImages//dokumenti/vjesnik/2020//3_2020.pdf (Accessed: 01.07.2021).

¹⁶ Coca Cola Sustainability Reports, 16th editions: https://it.coca-colahellenic.com/content/dam/cch/it/documents/a-more-sustainable-future/rapporto-sostenibilit%C3%A0/identit%C3%A0-e-mercato/190620_coca-cola_report_web.pdf.downloadasset.pdf (Accessed: 15.08.2021) and Coca Cola Sustainability Reports, 17th editions: https://it.coca-colahellenic.com/content/dam/cch/it/documents/a-more-sustainable-future/rapporto-sostenibilit%C3%A0/2020_CCHBC_report_web.pdf.downloadasset.pdf (Accessed: 01.07.2021).

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assessment (these activities are introduced by **BorgWarner**¹⁷, a company based in Poland). As a rule, however, such activities undertaken by companies focus on making training dependent on the expected promotion, which suggests that having soft skills is necessary in managerial positions only.

An extremely interesting example is the assessment of the competencies of a public sector employee based on a **customer satisfaction survey**¹⁸ that takes place at the **Rzeszow Municipal Council (Poland)**¹⁹. Most often it is said that officials always look at people who want to deal with official matters as "applicants". On the example of Rzeszów, internal regulations have been introduced that change this and suggest that local government administration employees treat these people as "clients", just like in business. Communication competences and other soft skills are also extremely important and necessary here, which is why this perspective is a valuable supplement to the topic of systematizing development paths. Understanding the perspective of a third party - the client - can be a valuable supplement to the information collected at the stage of, for example, the annual employee assessment. Although this example comes from the public sector, it is also a good case study for companies in the service and any other industries where there is contact with the customer.

European Union funds are also worth mentioning here, thanks to which initiatives are taken place such as **"Development program for top management" (Latvia)**²⁰, **"GovLab Innovation Laboratory" (Latvia)**²¹, **"Skills on Board" (Bulgaria, Greece, Croatia, Spain)**²² or **"Innovation in Action Academy" (Solvay Sodi Bulgaria)**²³ and many other projects are taken place. It turns out that even if a project financed from EU funds is not ultimately focused on the development of soft skills, it is usually an important part of it, crucial for achieving its goals. Very often, especially in international projects, participants develop soft skills such as team work, time management or communication. Such projects are therefore a response to filling the gaps in the soft skills of their participants.

In Latvia, initiatives aimed at representatives of public administration have been initiated. As part of the first of them - **"Development program for top management"** - activities were taken to train representatives of ministries in the area of soft skills. In the second case, the initiative entitled **The GovLab Innovation Laboratory** (currently the Innovation Laboratory of the State Chancellery) introduces innovative methods to solving complex problems (e.g. design thinking, Agile, LEAN) into everyday activities in Latvian offices, which also (while applying them) develop soft skills such as creativity, problem solving, team collaboration and communication. These initiatives are addressed to all representatives of ministries, but on the basis of secondary sources it is difficult to indicate whether this is the use of the "one tool for all" format.

¹⁷ BorgWarner profile at Pracuj.pl: <https://pracodawcy.pracuj.pl/borgwarner-poland-spolka-z-ograniczona-odpowiedzialnoscia,13298/benefit> (Accessed: 30.06.2021) and main company website: <https://www.borgwarner.com/home> (Accessed: 30.06.2021).

¹⁸ BIP Rzeszow (2020). Raport z badania satysfakcji klienta 2020. Available at: <http://s.bip.erzeszow.pl/file/162800/Raport%20z%20badania%20satysfakcji%20klient%C3%B3w%20UM%20-%20lipiec%202019%20r.%20-%20BIP.pdf> (Accessed: 30.06.2021).

¹⁹ Main website of Rzeszow Municipal Council: <https://www.erzeszow.pl/> (Accessed: 15.08.2021). <https://bip.erzeszow.pl/pl/100-urzed-miasta/4436-system-zarzadzania-jakoscia-urzedu-miasta-rzeszowa.html> (Accessed: 30.06.2021) and <https://bip.erzeszow.pl/100-urzed-miasta/4431-regulamin-przeprowadzania-okresowej-oceny-urzednikow-w-urzedzie-miasta-rzeszowa.html#tresc> (Accessed: 30.06.2021).

²⁰ Development program for top management - website: <https://www.mk.gov.lv/lv/projekts/augstaka-limena-vaditaju-attistibas-programma> (Accessed: 01.07.2021) and Online Handbook for efficient manager: <https://www.mk.gov.lv/lv/media/5408/download> (Accessed: 01.07.2021).

²¹ GovLab in Latvia website: <https://www.mk.gov.lv/lv/inovacijas-laboratorija-govlablatvia> (Accessed: 01.07.2021).

²² Main website of the project: <http://skillsonboard.eu/> (Accessed: 28.06.2021).

²³ Проектина Solvay. (2021). Retrieved 29 June 2021, from <https://www.solvay.bg/projects> (Accessed: 01.07.2021).

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Often the effects of projects financed from EU funds are generally available in many languages. This is the case of the international project **"SkillsOnBoard - Soft skills for professional skippers in a changing tourism industry" (Bulgaria, Greece, Croatia, Spain)**, whose training offer includes innovative, attractive, easy-to-follow training materials, supported by visualization of case studies, tests and assessment exercises. The material prepared as part of the project can be used for self-study or as a collection of guidelines and practices available "on demand". Free access to online training is offered in English, Greek, Bulgarian, Croatian and Spanish. Free, generally accessible materials prepared in an attractive form, as well as available in many languages are a great advantage of projects financed from EU funds.

The example of **Poste Italiane²⁴ (Italy)** draws attention to one more important aspect that cannot be ignored when talking about activities undertaken in order to identify needs and develop soft skills. Poste Italiane draws attention to the need to introduce a training effectiveness evaluation system, which measures the effectiveness, efficiency and quality of the offered training programs.

The example of **the Siemens company (branch/headquarters in the United Kingdom)²⁵** draws attention to another aspect related to the development of soft skills of young people entering the labor market. Among the activities undertaken by the company that are valuable for the development of soft skills, one should mention the involvement of last-year students to work on projects implemented, for example, by the described economic entity. Such activities allow young people to develop the necessary competences in a natural work environment (teamwork, time and people management, communication, negotiations, problem solving). These actions bring mutual benefits. They include, among others attractiveness of the company on the labor market, education and recruitment of new staff, bringing "fresh energy" to the company and development of competences in trainees. The success factors of the above-mentioned activities can also be seen in the transition from a hierarchical model to an organizational system based on "shared leadership", intrapreneurship and self-responsibility, as well as awareness of the importance of actions taken to develop human resources competences and their impact on the effectiveness of the organization.

The key factors of failure that may hold back the implementation of similar initiatives include, first of all, the risk of the lack of commitment of managers and the false belief that managing people is only a HR matter, cultural resistance from both the "upper" and "lower" levels of the organization, as well as the belief that soft skills apply only to management positions.

3. Key factors of success and failure that enrich the activities of developing soft skills in higher education

The examples of activities of universities in the area of soft skills development indicated in this section give rise to optimism. These activities focus primarily on additional, free training courses organized by university units (including Career Services), unfortunately they are usually addressed to a limited number of participants, and they are usually not included in the study program. Among universities ranked high in the employability rankings of graduates, the offered courses/training can be divided into two paths: (1) regarding personal skills (including time management, coping with stress, self-motivation, developing emotional

²⁴ Poste Italian website: <https://www.posteitaliane.it/en/crescere-professionalmente-poste-italiane.html> (Accessed: 01.07.2021). Poste Italian Annual Report 2019. Available at: <https://www.posteitaliane.it/files/1476515475256/Annual-Report-2019.pdf#page=237> (Accessed: 01.07.2021).

²⁵ Digital Academy website: <https://new.siemens.com/uk/en/company/jobs/life-at-siemens/digitalacademy.html> (Accessed: 01.07.2021) <https://new.siemens.com/it/it/azienda/fiere-eventi/accademia-digitale.html> (Accessed: 01.07.2021).

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intelligence, assertiveness); (2) interpersonal skills (including persuasive skills, conflict resolution, delegating tasks, teamwork, self-presentation)²⁶.

The organization of additional courses is often motivated by the demand of employers, which is undoubtedly a great advantage. Important in the aspect of universities and shaping future staff is the necessity to observe the needs of the market and be one step ahead of employers. On the other hand, it is very common to find training proposals addressed to the last year' students, which is probably (based on the conclusions of the basic research based on the opinions of employers) too late a stimulus for changes. Good practices from European universities, presented below, come to the rescue.

Universities are trying to introduce subjects into their study programs that shape soft skills. Some of them are mandatory, others are targeted at interested people. For example, the **University of Economics in Varna (Bulgaria)**²⁷ has been teaching **Business Communication** since 2015 (compulsory for Erasmus+ students and for English-speaking students). This subject includes a program aimed at shaping interpersonal attitudes, soft skills and practical skills in negotiations, public speaking, and teamwork.

The University of Information Technology and Management based in Rzeszów (Poland)²⁸ introduces subjects focused on soft skills to the course of studies. Students are equipped with practical interpersonal skills and the necessary soft skills. **Students must participate in subjects** such as interpersonal communication, intercultural communication and, where this is not possible, **as part of exercises they are involved in team work, exercises stimulating creative thinking or developing communication skills**. The university **optionally organizes trainings increasing the level of soft skills** (mostly free of charge). UITM also offers students **an additional (paid) specialization** preparing, among others to run their own business called Business Workshops²⁹, in which, among the competences directly and obviously related to running a business, attention is paid to soft skills such as communication and cooperation, creativity and self-presentation.

The Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH Zurich)³⁰ offers a "Leadership Support Program" aimed at employees and students. The offer includes coaching sessions, meetings with intern and external speakers. These meetings are isolated from the traditional curriculum, which may result in less interest in participating in leadership and social skills programs. However, it is difficult to indicate the effects of the initiatives undertaken due to the lack of information from the sources provided by the entity. However, the initiative itself deserves to be pointed out and followed.

The MBA (e-Leadership) programs offered by **Algebra University College (Croatia)**³¹ also include such modules as critical thinking, creativity, managing and leading people in a global environment, design thinking, and business communication. The program of these studies is considered to be one of the best in Europe (according to the European Commission). This example shows how important it is to develop soft skills at

²⁶ Based on: <https://www.wsb.net.pl/kursy-i-szkolenia/abecadlo-kompetencji-miekkich-2/> (Accessed: 30.06.2021).

²⁷ Business Communications at UE Varna: https://ue-varna.bg/uploads/discipline_files/cl9d_15064_Business_Communications_IB_Bachelor_EN.pdf (Accessed: 01.07.2021).

²⁸ UITM main website: <https://wsiz.edu.pl/> (Accessed: 01.07.2021). <https://wsiz.rzeszow.pl/aktualnosci/absolwenci-wsiiz-najszybciej-znajduja-prace-wg-ministerialnego-badania/> (Accessed: 30.06.2021).

²⁹ Warsztaty Biznesowe website: <https://wsiz.edu.pl/studia/studiowanie/wb/> (Accessed: 30.06.2021).

³⁰ ETH Zurich website: <https://ethz.ch/students/en/doctorate/teaching-task-and-language-skills.html> (Accessed: 01.07.2021) and <https://ethz.ch/services/en/employment-and-work/leadership-and-development/human-resources-courses/offerings-by-target-group.html> (Accessed: 01.07.2021) and <https://ethz.ch/services/en/service/courses-continuing-education.html> (Accessed: 01.07.2021).

³¹ Algebra University College: <https://www.algebra.hr/> (Accessed: 30.06.2021) and e-Leadership MBA study programme: www.algebra.hr/mba (Accessed: 30.06.2021).

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every level of education, also (and in the context of the previous parts of the report, especially) of managerial staff.

In the **Stockholm School of Economics in Riga (Latvia)**, academic consulting was implemented (compulsory for students). These are compulsory coaching exercises for all students of the 1st year of undergraduate studies. There are 4 individual coaching sessions per year. Students appreciate this initiative. They highlight that it influences their development and achieved results. During the sessions, they develop competences related to self-development, time management, self-reflection, teamwork and communication. The biggest downside of this solution, however, is its time-consuming nature and the need to involve qualified staff.

Many initiatives are undertaken by universities in parallel with academic activities. At **LUISS Business School (Italy), the Executive Skill Lab**³² was created, which thematically covers the current market trends by offering participants the development of soft skills, challenging themselves, discovering potential, overcoming their limitations. The scope of the subject matter of the Executive Skill Lab is two categories - the so-called Megatrend and Life Skill. Megatrend courses provide an in-depth look at current issues that are affecting the labor market and require constant employee updating (i.e. remote leadership, Industry 4.0 and AI at work, smart work opportunities and challenges, etc.). Life Skill courses enable the development of soft skills for students, professionals and managers who wish to learn how to improve their personal and professional efficiency.

At **Ecole Polytechnique (France)**, a community / group called **X-Soft-Skills**³³ has been created with the aim of fostering awareness and "proficiency" of soft skills among students and staff. It is an interesting initiative that creates the possibility of conducting discussions in a "safe" environment based on 3 elements: 1) development and "revision", 2) gamification and training, and 3) practical aspects of the above activities. Members of the X-Soft-Skills community have access to free materials prepared by other users and shared on the internal discussion forum.

Career days initiatives are a great opportunity for regular meetings addressed to university students. **The University of Economics in Varna (Bulgaria)** as part of the **PROMINENCE Interactive**³⁴ project and the Dukenet - the consortium of universities, organizes international regular events developing a variety of skills. Such initiatives increase the employability of participants through acquired experience and learning through empirical learning.

The example of **Zagreb School of Economics and Management (Croatia)**³⁵ highlights the role of Career Centers/Offices, which play an important role in student career planning, self-assessment and training, as well as in the context of labor market assessment, labor demand and internship opportunities. It is the

³² LUISS Business School website: <https://businessschool.luiss.it/offerta-formativa/executive-skill-lab/> (Accessed: 01.07.2021) and <https://www.luiss.it/ateneo/nucleo-di-valutazione/indagine-sui-laureati#:~:text=Il%20tempo%20medio%20di%20attesa,%C3%A8%20inferiore%20a%202%20mesi> (Accessed: 01.07.2021).

³³ X-Soft-Skills website: <https://x-soft-skills.blogspot.com/p/referentiel-de-soft-skills.html> (Accessed: 01.07.2021). <https://x-soft-skills.blogspot.com/p/billets.html> (Accessed: 01.07.2021).

³⁴ Interactive lessons - PROMINENCE. (2021). from <https://www.prominenceproject.eu/index.php/prominence-interactive/study-guide/study-module/interactive-lessons/> (Accessed: 22.06.2021), <https://ue-varna.bg/en/news/international-erasmus-project-completion/834> (Accessed: 22.06.2021), https://ue-varna.bg/~uevarna/uploads/filemanager/352/PROMINENCE_end.pdf (Accessed: 22.06.2021) and <https://ue-varna.bg/en/news/gold-medals-for-university-of-economics-varna-students-in-dukenet-spring-markstrat-challenge-2021/1021> (Accessed: 22.06.2021).

³⁵ The Zagreb School of Economics and Management: <https://www.zsem.hr/> and Undergraduate programme in Economics and Management: <https://www.zsem.hr/en/study-programs/undergraduate/economics-and-management/about/> (Accessed: 01.07.2021). Goals and competences acquired within the Undergraduate Studies of Economics and Management: <https://www.zsem.hr/media/2019/11/List-of-learning-goals-outcomes-and-competences-of-ZSEM-programs.pdf> (Accessed: 01.07.2021).

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career offices that cooperate with companies and also receive information about market needs. These centers are also responsible for brokerage and strengthening independence, they offer discussions with experts.

Counseling and self-empowerment is one of the services offered to students also by the **Bocconi University in Milan (Italy)**³⁶. The purpose of such a service is to promote the mental wellbeing of students while enhancing their skills and connections/collaboration/networks. The service helps students identify situations of impasse or difficulty that are an obstacle to each person's personal and professional development. They will then receive help to manage the change. At the same time, the university offers useful paths for acquiring skills to maintain employability in the labor market, enriching work experience and other knowledge acquired during studies.

The University of Navarra (Spain)³⁷, with the help of its own Career Services Department, offers preparation of students for professional entry into the labor market. Interestingly, the initiative was implemented at the request of the students themselves, who expressed the need for more training in employability. In response to the demand, the "ESSENTIALS" program³⁸ was launched, under which training courses are held throughout the whole study period and students learn about the recruitment techniques of companies and develop soft skills desired by employers.

The relatively recent initiatives **in Latvia** prove that universities should focus on enriching the educational offer with aspects related to soft skills. From the new academic year (2021/2022), **Riga Stradins University**³⁹ introduces training in soft skills to the study program. The 40-hour course is aimed at students in the final year of their undergraduate studies and is designed for students to improve soft skills such as communication, interaction, adaptation, perception, active listening and emotional intelligence.

Good practices show that the development of soft skills is not only the domain of universities with humanities or studies such as management. Technical universities also attach great importance to the soft skills. For example, **the Polytechnic University of Madrid (Spain)**⁴⁰ carried out an initiative called Power You Xperience⁴¹, which emphasizes the importance of soft skills in technical studies profiles. During an organized meeting with representatives of HR departments from companies such as Airbus, ITP., Aero, BT Spain, EY and CEPESA, the great importance of soft skills such as adaptability, critical thinking, teamwork, creativity and innovation as key competences enabling employment in technical profiles was noted.

It is worth emphasizing that many initiatives consider the opinion of employers or involve their representatives directly in exchanging opinions, meetings and sharing knowledge with students. **The Career Office of the Warsaw University of Technology (Poland)**⁴² has created a project addressed to students (bachelor and master degree), under which it conducts workshops supporting the development of competences and skills

³⁶ Bocconi University in Milan website: https://www.unibocconi.it/wps/wcm/connect/Bocconi/SitoPubblico_IT/Albero+di+navigazione/Home/corsi+di+studio/studenti+iscritti/Servizi/Counseling++and+Self-Empowerment/ (Accessed: 01.07.2021).

³⁷ University of Navarra website: <https://www.unav.edu/> (Accessed: 01.07.2021) and University of Navarra. (2021). Improve your employability. <https://www.unav.edu/web/careerservices/alumnos-alumni/programa-essentials> (Accessed: 01.07.2021).

³⁸ ESSENTIALS program website: <https://www.unav.edu/web/careerservices/alumnos-alumni/programa-essentials> (Accessed: 01.07.2021).

³⁹ Riga Stradins University website: https://www.rsu.lv/kurss/SUPK_098?t=1 (Accessed: 30.07.2021).

⁴⁰ Polytechnic University of Madrid website: <https://www.upm.es/> (Accessed: 01.07.2021).

⁴¹ Power You Xperience website: https://www.etsiae.upm.es/in-dex.php?id=737&tx_news_pi1%5Bnews%5D=40&tx_news_pi1%5Bcontroller%5D=News&tx_news_pi1%5Baction%5D=detail&cHash=40493cc48310a3f7d5bf25e69d106638 (Accessed: 01.07.2021).

⁴² Akcelerator Kariery at Warsaw University of Technology website: <https://www.pw.edu.pl/Aktualnosci/Akcelerator-Kariery-przyspiesz-swoja-kariere-z-Biurem-Karier> (Accessed: 30.06.2021).

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needed on the labor market, in cooperation with qualified employees of the Career Office (specialists in the field of recruitment, career counseling and trainers of interpersonal competences) with representatives of employers. Students are free to choose the thematic block they would like to use.

The above initiatives of universities indicate a wide range of opportunities to take actions towards the development of soft skills of students, who will soon contribute to the resources of the labor market. What tools will be used by universities, as well as what will be their effectiveness measured by the employability of their graduates, depends only on themselves.

4. Summary and findings

- Usually, when we think about the methods of assessing the level of soft skills, we mention tools based on self-assessment, assessment making by a supervisor or a traditional competence test. However, the indicated examples do not fully show how wide a set of various tools that companies can use to assess the level of soft skills of employees is at their disposal. The available tools include, among others: anonymous surveys, “diagnosis of training needs, limitations and problems”, employee assessment and self-assessment, customer satisfaction surveys, the "secret client" technique, activities using gamification based on online platforms and others. Thus, the scope of application of tools for diagnosing soft skills should be considered as incomplete and at the same time as a standard.
- Interested companies can use the services of specialized institutions that deal commercially with the entire process of developing soft skills. Starting from the measurement of their current level, through assessment, and ending with training soft skills or creating a unit and programs dedicated to these activities.
- The initiatives taken to assess the level of soft skills in employees in the traditional forms including tests, diagnosis sheets, work observation, carry the risk of the lack of reliable results. That is why it is so important to use the available various forms of assessing the level of soft skills of employees, and not to be limited to the simplest, but also the least precise diagnostic tools.
- Among the additional factors of failure of activities dedicated to the development of soft skills (or the lack of them), it should be also mentioned the organizational factors, such as low commitment of the management or low involvement of employees in undertaken initiatives (however, it is not easy to estimate on the basis of available secondary sources).
- “One solution for all” may be counterproductive, therefore it is important to assess the initial competences level and adapt the tools for the development of soft skills of employees in the context of their competences and requirements for a given position.
- Factors that are unfavorable for undertaking activities aimed at assessing and developing soft skills of employees are often expensive tools and equally costly services related to the process of assessing their level among employees, followed by training to build soft skills. No less expensive option is to create specialized units dedicated to the activities of valorization and development of soft skills within the organization.
- To assess and develop soft skills, tools such as preliminary tests, job evaluation for the previous year, training needs research and self-assessment, customer satisfaction surveys are used. All of them allow to define training needs. Subsequently, activities are undertaken using gamification and innovative

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tools dedicated to activities related to, among others, with the sharing of knowledge and experience, internal training platforms and centers, coaching plans and career paths, as well as development programs financed from European funds.

- The activities of universities towards the development of soft skills of future staff are present both at universities in the humanities (including such fields as management) and at technical universities. They focus primarily on additional, free training courses organized by university units (including Career Offices/Centers). Unfortunately, they are usually aimed at a limited number of participants and are usually not included in the study program. In both cases, this limits their availability to people potentially interested in them.
- The organization of additional courses is often motivated by employers' demand, which is undoubtedly a great advantage. The shaping of future staff requires market observation and the development of study programs that meet not so much the present, but the future needs of employers. The trick is not to offer products that everyone offers. Being a leader means recognizing needs and introducing solutions that place the university as a pioneer of competences for which the market is just beginning to report its needs.
- Universities introduce to their study programs subjects developing soft skills. It should be emphasized, however, that very often training proposals are addressed to students of the final year of studies. The results of research carried out as part of the project show that this is probably too late in the entire study process to be an effective stimulus for changes in their portfolio of soft skills.
- Universities optionally organize workshops and trainings for students (usually free of charge), they also offer (through career offices) career counseling or meetings with representatives of HR departments to obtain knowledge about current trends in the labor market and the required development of necessary soft skills.
- Universities are creating communities dedicated to the exchange of knowledge and experiences, discussions and supporting awareness of the importance of soft skills and achieving "proficiency" in the field of soft skills among students.
- The organizational units of universities also play an important role in filling the gap in the higher education system in terms of soft skills, include career centers/offices. It is the career offices that cooperate with companies and receive information about market needs. These centers are also responsible for brokerage and strengthening independence, they offer discussions with experts.

Part no 2. Country reports: national approaches on soft skills education

The 2020 World Economic Forum Future of Jobs Report⁴³ claimed that process automation and robots related to the COVID-19 situation will create a 'double-disruption' scenario for workers. In addition to the current disruption from the pandemic-induced lockdowns and economic contraction, technological adoption by companies will transform tasks, jobs and skills by 2025.

The Report forecasted skills gaps within the next few years. From the employers' point of view the most important skills are: critical thinking, analysis, problem solving, and self-management skills: active learning, resilience, stress tolerance and flexibility. Moreover, companies estimated that 40% of workers would require reskilling among near future. 94% of all business leaders expected employees to acquire completely new skills on the job⁴⁴.

According to the "**Future Work Skills 2030 Report**"⁴⁵, 70% of us work today in a profession that will still exist in 10 years, but the way of doing it will change significantly. 20% of the currently existing 'mechanical' works will be replaced by robots. The "Employee of the Future Report"⁴⁶ published by the PwC predicts that 47% of the current occupations may disappear by 2030.

In the face of such announcements what kind of skills will be desired in near future? Emotional intelligence is valued more than diplomas today (in the first place in the desired competences in the "Future Skills 2020 Report" published by Institute of the Future⁴⁷, as well as others: the ability to learn (first in the "Future of skills. Employment in 2030 Report"⁴⁸), the ability to cooperate, comprehensive problem solving, adaptive thinking, effective communication and creativity.

One of the main conclusions from country reports is that the group most affected by unemployment is group of young people. It is observed in European average and countries results as well. For an example, youth employment rate as percent of the population aged 15 to 24 in Spain was equal to 20% in period 2017-2019. In the same time, the average for the whole European Union was at the level of 30%. Similar situation can be found in Poland. The pandemic situation strengthens this effect.

Another conclusion based on country reports is that country public entities declare support in the area of preparing strategies and developing soft skills among youth people but these efforts are more related to the improvement of qualifications, formal aspects and technical skills, with the generic expression most commonly used being "competences", and revealing a lack of specific information on the field of soft skills in the area of higher education, and therefore, their theoretical analysis and practical development concerning the employability of the group in question. The actions of the university appear to be more specific and will get more profitable effects in long term, what will be described in next part.

⁴³ The 2020 World Economic Forum Future of Jobs Report website: <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-future-of-jobs-report-2020> (Accessed: 11.07.2021).

⁴⁴ Fałatowicz M. (2019). Umiejętności miękkie na polskim i światowym rynku pracy. Adzuna blog website: <https://www.adzuna.pl/blog/2019/02/05/umiejtnosci-miekkie-na-polskim-i-swiatowym-ryнку-pracy/> (Accessed: 24.04.2021); Dyrła-Mularczyk, K., Pluciński, M.A., & Borowiec, A. (2018). Kompetencje miękkie absolwentów uczelni wyższych-perspektywa pracodawców sektora MŚP. *Przedsiębiorczość i zarządzanie*, 19 (8, cz. 3 szkoła-studia-doskonalenie zawodowe: problemy, propozycje, inspiracje), pp. 213-226.

⁴⁵ Future Work Skills 2030 website: <https://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv:61214> (Accessed: 1.07.2021).

⁴⁶ Employee of the Future Report website: <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/services/people-organisation/publications/workforce-of-the-future.html> (Accessed: 30.06.2021).

⁴⁷ The Future Skills 2020 Report website: <https://www.iftf.org/futureworkskills/> (Accessed: 30.06.2021).

⁴⁸ Future of skills. Employment in 2030 Report website: <https://futureskills.pearson.com/research/assets/pdfs/technical-report.pdf> (Accessed: 1.07.2021).

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This part of the report has been divided into three sections summarizing the work of the ESSENCE project consortium countries. The first section shows the implementation of highly advanced soft skills research in and valorization strategies, showing the activities undertaken in the field of research and evaluation of the possessed soft skills. The second section of this part of the report is dedicated to the activities undertaken in the area of recognizing, shaping and developing soft skills among students and employees. Last but not the least section of this report, shows examples of actions taken by higher education institutions and universities, which allow to fill the gap in the soft skills education system at this level of education.

1. Overview of national contexts in terms of the specificity of skills development in terms of employability

The latest development in the Europe in the light of COVID-19 pandemic triggered some significant changes related to the employment and skills development for employability. The increased remote work, more extensive use of digital tools and more internationalization are the few aspects that were affected by the pandemic. This is particularly evident for the second phase of the pandemic that started in Autumn 2020. During the first phase (Feb- June 2020) majority of the population was perceiving the lockdown as something short and temporary. In many cases no steps to adapt to the new situation were made. People just waited to go back to the previous normal situation. However, the second phase clearly demanded more significant adaptation. One could call this as acceptance for the pandemic. The working routines (digitalization, remote work etc.), were adjusted to the lockdown and the “new normal” became a reality.

COVID-19 pandemic changed the work life. Regarding Future of Jobs Survey, World Economic Forum (2020)⁴⁹ changes of work life will affect following areas: digitalization of work processes, digitalization of upskilling/reskilling and implementation of upskilling/reskilling programmes.

Upskilling or reskilling programmes for achieving better effects should be implemented from EU level. An example of this action is a **European Skills Agenda, 2020**⁵⁰. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the digital transition. While telework and distance learning have become a reality for millions of people in the EU, the limitations of our current digital preparedness were often also revealed. The role of this package is to strengthen sustainable competitiveness, increases the number of STEM (science, technology, engineering, maths) graduates and fosters entrepreneurial and transversal skills, along with skills for life. What is more, this program will ensure social fairness, putting into practice the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights: access to education, training and lifelong learning for everybody, everywhere in the EU as well as build resilience to react to different crises like COVID-19 pandemic.

The European Union has recently implemented its policies and investment plans with the aim of recognizing soft skills as an important factor in maintaining and implementing Europe’s international competitiveness and the employability of its citizens. The European Council⁵¹ has repeatedly emphasized the key role of lifelong learning and skills development policies, which are essential to enable society to cope with the technological and green transition and to support an inclusive and sustainable economic and social growth.

⁴⁹ Future of Jobs Survey, World Economic Forum website: <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2020/12/WEF-future-of-jobs-report-2020-zahidi.htm> (Accessed: 10.07.2021).

⁵⁰ European Skills Agenda, 2020 website: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1223&langId=en> (Accessed: 30.06.2021).

⁵¹ The European Council website: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52019XG1118\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52019XG1118(01)&from=EN) (Accessed: 30.06.2021).

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CEDEFOP (The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training) has created a **European Skills Index**⁵² (ESI) to measure the performance of European countries in the field of development, activation and matching of the skills. The performance of each country is calculated with regard to the “distance to ideal performance” (i.e. the distance to the highest performance achieved by a country over a 7-year period) and is expressed as a percentage.

The Skills Matching⁵³ section of CEDEFOP shows more specifically the general spread of the skills mismatch phenomenon and the low utilisation of skills in the European labour market. The analysis of skills mismatch shows a general spread of the phenomenon in many EU countries: out of 31 countries surveyed, the average skill mismatch is 47.4, underlining a wide and widespread distance from the ideal performance in the field of skills matching.

The European Foundation for Society and Education (EFSE) in the report "The skills of university learners and the demands of the labour market"⁵⁴, discusses once again the mismatch observed in Spain between the skills of workers and the demands of the labour market, questioning the origin of these shortcomings of graduates in terms of skills, concluding in a summary of the current situation and among some of the points, the need for a better match between training and the demands of employers.

ESSENCE project consortium countries have different national strategies for developing and promoting education, soft skills and life-long learning. **Bulgaria** had national strategy for life-long learning for the period 2014 – 2020. After this, Bulgaria had strategic framework for the development of education, training and learning for the period 2021 – 2030. In Bulgaria, policies at the national level are in line with current trends in modern education, which involves not only direct transfer of knowledge from teachers to students, but also builds skills for independent and critical thinking, teamwork and personal development.

In turn, in **Croatia** the issue of soft skills was also recognised by the Croatian Government in the National Youth Programme 2014-2017. In 2020, the Croatian government published the new National Youth Program 2020-2024. Although, the document is in the phase of public consultation and thus cannot be considered an official policy paper, a partial reference to soft skills can be seen in several places.

In **Poland**, public sector initiatives are centralized in form of “Integrated Strategy Skills 2030” developed and implemented by Polish Ministry of Education and Science. The overriding goal of the Integrated Skills Strategy is to create opportunities and conditions for development the skills necessary to strengthen social capital, social inclusion, economic growth and achieving a high quality of life.

In turn, in **Spain** recent public employment policies, related to the education sector, skills and employability⁵⁵, are the "Initiatives and measures for the enhancement of Vocational Training 2020"⁵⁶. In this document was included "I Strategic Plan for Vocational Training of the Education System" which determine a system that unifies the VET (Vocational Education Training). Spanish Ministry of Education and Vocational Training (MEFP) prepared so called "Draft Organic Law on Education", which aims to address the main

⁵² The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training website: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/data-visualisations/european-skills-index> (Accessed: 30.06.2021).

⁵³ The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training website: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/data-visualisations/european-skills-index/skills-matching> (Accessed: 30.06.2021).

⁵⁴ The European Foundation for Society and Education website: <https://www.sociedadeducacion.org/site/wp-content/uploads/Las-Competencias-de-los-Universitarios-y-la-Demandas-del-Mercado-Laboral.pdf> (Accessed: 30.06.2021).

⁵⁵ The European Commission website: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/national-reforms-related-transversal-skills-and-employability-70_es (Accessed: 10.06.2021).

⁵⁶ The European Commission website: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/national-reforms-vocational-education-and-training-and-adult-learning-70_es (Accessed: 15.06.2021).

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challenges of the education system, such as improving the competence level of all students, and guaranteeing a floor for investment in education and scholarships regardless of political alternatives and economic circumstances among others.

In the “OECD Skills Strategy” prepared for **Italy**⁵⁷ (2017), the OECD underlined the main difficulties detected and solutions adopted in Italy to manage the general lack of soft skills in workers and younger people. Several critical points depict a difficult situation in the domains of skills development and employability. Italian graduates have, on average, a lower rate of skills (i.e. reading and mathematical skills) than graduates in other countries (26 th place out of 29 OECD countries, in both fields), to which are added inactivity and unemployment rates among the highest compared to the other OECD countries.

The smallest documental evidence about the soft skills development is observed in **Latvia**. It is required a clear need to address this issue on a wider policy basis. That’s way was shaped general framework for education development Skola 2030 which outlines the necessity to put more focus on soft skills and cross-disciplinary learning. The project has started in 2016 and will finish in 2023. As an outcome from the project the new methodologies and tools will be developed.

ESSENCE project consortium countries deliver evidences that soft skills research studies are regularly conducted among EU countries. Report “**Getting Skills Right: Spain**”⁵⁸ carries out a study related to skills in order to address the imbalances in Spain, comparing them with the rest of the European Union countries, providing an analysis of practices and policies in the area, and in this way improve the relationship with employability, an aspect to which all studies refer in order to improve. However, it can be observed how the detailed studies do not yet focus on soft skills in particular, but rather in general terms, relegating them to a secondary role.

Spanish The Universia Foundation⁵⁹, a university cooperation network with a focus on academic and employment guidance, which promotes links between universities and companies, mentions in an article on its website how soft skills are increasingly valued in the workplace, highlighting the difficulty for employers to find people with the soft skills required for the jobs on offer. This information is based on a study carried out by LinkedIn at the end of 2017⁶⁰. Then, it proposes to the reader a selection of the 10 soft skills most in demand by employers according to the social profile of the candidate who changed jobs and thus updated it in their LinkedIn profile: 1) Good communication skills 2) Good organization 3) Teamwork 4) Punctuality 5) Critical thinking 6) Flexibility and ability to solve problems 7) Creativity 8) Interpersonal skills 9) Adaptability 10) Friendly personality.

The issue of soft skills is also recognised by the **Croatia** under in-depth analysis called **National Youth Programme 2014-2017**. A survey of the young population conducted for this document showed that young people see communication skills (51%) and foreign language skills (43%) among the most important soft skills. Similar to other strategic documents, the importance of a multifunctional group of skills, knowledge and competences is emphasised as a prerequisite for personal fulfilment, social inclusion and employability. To this end, communication skills, digital competences, incentive and entrepreneurship, and the ability to learn are mentioned as important soft skills.

⁵⁷ OECD website: “Strategia per le competenze dell’OCSE: Italia”, 2017, available at: <https://www.oecd.org/skills/national-skillsstrategies/Strategia-per-le-Competenze-dell-OCSE-Italia-2017-Sintesi-del-Rapporto.pdf> (Accessed: 25.06.2021).

⁵⁸ OECD website: <https://www.oecd.org/spain/getting-skills-right-spain-9789264282346-en.htm> (Accessed: 15.07.2021).

⁵⁹ Spanish Universia Foundation website: <https://www.fundacionuniversia.net/es/index.html> (Accessed: 10.06.2021).

⁶⁰ LinkedIn website: <https://es.linkedin.com/pulse/las-habilidades-y-los-perfiles-m%C3%A1s-demandados-por-dk-consultores> (Accessed: 11.07.2021).

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Manpower group⁶¹ has undertaken studies to identify global trends with view of soft skills shortage identification and the shift in their set-in terms of importance as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The results about employees in **Bulgaria** indicate that some of the skills required for employment are connected with underdeveloped soft skills. Talent shortages are at a 15-year high as hard & soft skills are more difficult to find than ever before. 69% of companies globally report talent shortages, with Bulgaria at even a higher level – 71% of employers in Bulgaria are having difficulty filling jobs.

According to the 2020 Observatory Barometer by the Cegos Group 10, **Italian** managers consider skills like: adaptability, remote management and digital communication to be a fundamental part of the employee profile. Italian HR professionals seem to reveal that adaptability has become more important, to the disadvantage of creativity and propensity to innovation: this due to the challenges created by the spread of COVID-19.

The Polish economy is increasingly based on knowledge, therefore insufficient resources of employees with appropriate competences are a challenge for enterprises competing for local and global markets and threaten growth potential. The chances of the Polish economy depend on creativity, innovation, entrepreneurship, the ability to cooperate and take responsibility, the ability to deal with uncertainty and the specific technical skills of Poles. Numerous studies show that **Poles** do not have an appropriate profile of competences and skills. OECD analysis included in report „Getting Skills Right: Future-Ready Adult Learning Systems (2019) place Poland in 9th place among the 34-member states of the organization in the context of the urgent need to increase the competences and skills of adults (in group age 25-64). Poland also belongs to the group of five countries with the highest percentage of the adult population showing low digital competence in solving problems (digital problem solving). In addition, one of the dimensions on which Poland advises less is the adjustment of the adult education system to the requirements of the labor market. Regardless of the industry and specialization, **Polish** employers emphasize the growing demand for soft skills of candidates⁶². Their value and their importance are all the greater because in the era of dynamic changes affecting the labor market, they allow professionals to operate effectively and find themselves in changing realities.

2. Employers perspective on soft skills development paths for employability

Employers predict that the image of the ideal employee will transform. It will increase the importance of such skills as: the ability to cooperate, resistance to stress, ability time management, desire for continuous development, creativity, interpersonal skills, empathy and adaptability⁶³.

An ideal employee should actively invest in the development of their knowledge - be up to date with industry news, know the current moves of the competition, participate in conferences and monitor customer satisfaction in order to improve or improve the services provided. Regardless of the area of specialization, readiness to continue learning and following trends are qualities highly valued by most employers. After all, the success of the company depends to a large extent on the knowledge of employees.

⁶¹ Manpower Group website: ManpowerGroup Talent Shortage Study. Retrieved from <https://go.manpowergroup.com/talent-shortage> (Accessed: 11.07.2021).

⁶² LinkedIn website: Badanie kompetencje miękkie vs. twarde. <https://seewidely.com/kompetencje-miekkie-vs-twarde/> (Accessed: 14.04.2021).

⁶³ PARP website: Marketingowe kompetencje przyszłości. Wyniki cyklicznego badania potrzeb szkoleniowo-rozwojowych w sektorze komunikacji marketingowej (Accessed: 14.04.2021).

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Very interesting and unusual idea is to apply gaming idea in developing soft skills. **Global Manpower group** have prepared **Gaming Skills Translator**, generally available tool, determining the level of soft skills among potential candidates. The impact of games on the development of soft skills is important information for both candidates and companies which, as a result of the talent shortage persisting despite the pandemic, have to look for increasingly creative methods of reaching potential employees. The general idea of this concept is to determine the soft skills developed by different game types. On this basis, they developed a diagram showing the relationship between the category of the game and professional competences. Games can help employers assess the skills of potential employees and increase the attractiveness of the candidate on the labor market.

Deloitte, in its “Preparing tomorrow’s workforce for the Fourth Industrial Revolution”⁶⁴ (2018), aware of the challenges of the labour market and the new training needs, identified four useful recommendations to start on a path defined as “collective”. This new “path” is the results of a new collaboration between the principal actors of the labour market, and its goal is to develop initiatives and a new strategy for the development of skill and to foster employability of young people. Establish close cooperation and exchanging best practices is key to act for the improvement of the “youth employment ecosystem”.

In **Poland** in quite popular are “**talent management programs**” where crucial part is soft skills development, due to the fact that the goals of talent programs are most often related to development leaders or future managers, the content of the programs is concerned the most common issues related to leadership, communication skills, working under stress and people management. This kind of activities can be found in different kind of branches like fuel industry (Orlen) or in financial sector as well (BRE Bank, ING Bank).

The Polish activity in private sector should be mentioned that all kinds of practical activities for business play an increasingly important role: implementation of internal projects, implementation of changes and improvements, team / individual tasks, work on case studies, presentations in front of Sponsors, mentoring, etc. We are seeing a strong trend to develop people inside the company, using internal resources (coaches, mentors).

In **Bulgaria** can be found similar example of applying online platform for purpose of development soft skills. **The National Competence Assessment System MyCompetence** is an online platform created by the Bulgarian Industrial Association (BIA) in the field of human resource management and development. It offers information on models of sector competences for key positions; job descriptions; assessment tools; e-learning resources and other specialised services for assessment and development of workforce competencies. Moreover, it offers various assessment tools for different soft skills – managerial competencies, social competencies, emotional intelligence, team efficiency, motivation and satisfaction, decision-making skills and problem solving, business negotiations, workplace stress management skills, abilities for concentration and attention to detail.

In **Bulgaria** have diagnosed lack of specific soft skills among different professions. Research has pointed out the need of soft skills development in the tourism industry in Bulgaria so that it is able to boost its competitiveness. Bulgarian researchers have singled out communication skills as highly effective in management. Managers need excellent communication skills so that they can exercise their other functions such as: planning, organising, supervising, etc.

⁶⁴ Deloitte website: https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/br/Documents/technology-media-telecommunications/preparing-tomorrow-workforce-for-4IR_C.pdf (Accessed: 10.04.2021).

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In turn in the IT industry, digitization of HR management systems has raised the question of how best to optimise HR management tools. This calls for the development of soft skills at the workplace and the introduction of new organisational approaches, such as agile management that has revolutionised the operation of IT companies elsewhere.

In Bulgaria private sector initiatives for development soft skills include activities like: **Arthur Adams Business Training Centre** in Bulgaria which offers a portfolio of certification programmes for soft skills and personal effectiveness. Similar activities are offered by **KPMG** and **PwC** in Bulgaria. First example offers to employees internal training which strengthen their soft skills. PwC Bulgaria is certainly a great learning experience. Here, each individual has access to various local and international learning possibilities, focusing on technical and soft skills aspects.

When talking about the private sector in **Spain**, it should be underlined that employers face difficulties when it comes to finding qualified professional profiles for the positions to be filled. As an example, should be cited **CYD Foundation**⁶⁵, which based on the CYD 2018 report⁶⁶, with regard to the relationship between university graduates and the labour market in Spain. This report states that due to the complex situation of the labour market in Spain, together with the profound economic and social transformations, have generated a more diversified, specialised and globalised labour environment, where high rates of unemployment and over-qualification prevail. These changes have a direct impact on the employability of university graduates: "increasingly competent professionals are needed, who are flexible in the face of changes and demands of the profession, who are able to learn, unlearn and learn again, or who are prepared to make quick decisions, often with very little information" ", and that all this requires new challenges for the higher education system. He concludes with the need to improve the link between higher education institutions and the working environment. We can see on this occasion that there is an implicit reference to soft skills.

3. Successful examples of bridging the gap in the soft skills education system in higher education

For the purpose of this report, project consortium countries have tried to find out how look like the issue of developing soft skills among public and private institutions from higher education sector. The observations around project consortium countries give the general view like this: private institutions are more specified and active through developing soft skills among students. Only one exception is Italy, that seems to have strong background in public Higher Education Institutions. This example will be discussed in more detail later in this section.

We know through the study "**Employability and digital talent - Digital Talent Index 2019**"⁶⁷ conducted by the Vass Foundation, how it is increasingly requested to have the right skills for each specific job to access the labour market; and with respect to students and their relationship with soft skills, it is of particular attention, as it indicates that students believe they have a better level of soft skills than that perceived by companies, perceiving the need for a dynamic training of these skills that can help them to measure and develop them.

⁶⁵ CYD Foundation website: <https://www.fundacioncyd.org/graduados-universitarios-mercado-de-trabajo-en-espana/> (Accessed: 10.07.2021).

⁶⁶ CYD Foundation website: https://www.fundacioncyd.org/publicaciones-cyd/informe-cyd-2018/?utm_source=blog&utm_medium=post&utm_campaign=capitulos (Accessed: 10.07.2021).

⁶⁷ Spanish Vass Foundation website: https://fundacionvass.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Estudio-de-Talento_-version-Web.pdf (Accessed: 10.07.2021).

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The European University Association (EUA) in the Report “Meeting skills and employability demands”⁶⁸ (2021), stress the role of the institutions of HE higher education in shaping citizenship of tomorrow and in preparing younger to the new labour market. The skills that young graduates should have should not only be hard skills (the result of years of study) but also soft skills to be able to cope with modern challenges. The employability of younger people is the result of learning in higher education, which is useful for graduates throughout their professional lives. However, the EUA also recognises ways of developing a more effective and student-friendly education pathway.

- Universities should enhance the concept of employability by promoting and collaborating to develop a strategy at institutional level. institutional commitment must be supported by the vision of HE institutions, which are closer to students and their learning needs.
- We need to integrate each parallel learning experience into the normal learning pathway, creating a unique and valuable learning experience.
- Action must be taken to empower students, not only by making them aware of learning opportunities and their level of preparation, but also by empowering them to be the first promoters of their own education.

For the purpose of this report was done in-depth an analysis of soft skills modules offered in selected **Croatian** public universities and private higher education institutions as well. First example is connected with destinations like Zagreb, Split, Rijeka, Osijek and Dubrovnik, in turn, private higher education institutions are represented by Zagreb School of Economics and Management, Algebra and Vern. The main outcomes of observations are following: the offer of soft skills modules in public institutions is rather superficial - all of mentioned places offers modules from the scope of communication, negotiation and ethics. Only in a few cases, these modules are complemented by modules such as leadership and crisis management.

On the other hand, from the private higher education institutions point of view this activity is more specific and in-depth. While **Croatian** private higher education institutions include communication skills modules in their curricula, students have also the opportunity to take modules that address critical thinking and presentation skills, and in one case the programmes also included modules such as stress management, crisis communication, and teamwork skills. It is worth highlighting that both public and private HEIs in **Croatia** offer soft skills development modules across all programmes, suggesting that organisations recognise their relevance to students' future employability and wellbeing.

Successful example of program dedicated to students can be found in the **University of Dubrovnik** (Croatia) is the project VIBES of the research centre CREDO. Recognising that already before the Covid-19 pandemic about one third of employees worldwide worked remotely and that this trend is likely to increase in the post-pandemic period, CREDO gathered a consortium of partners from Croatia, Belgium, Finland, Estonia and Switzerland with the aim of developing training modules for building competences for working in virtual teams in a multicultural environment. Within this project, the consortium aims to bring together academics and business community from different countries as trainers of students in targeted soft skills. A particularly noteworthy dimension of the project is its farsighted orientation. The consortium is developing a virtual platform for the exchange of experiences in soft skills training between teachers and trainers from different parts of Europe, thus creating the conditions for sustainability and growth of the incentive.

⁶⁸ The European University Association website: https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/eua%20tpg%20report_meeting%20skills%20and%20employability%20demands.pdf (Accessed: 05.07.2021).

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Overall, there is substantial evidence that Croatian higher education institutions are investing their efforts to improve the soft skills of their students. These efforts take place in several dimensions. On the one hand, it seems that both public and private institutions have for some time recognised the importance of soft skills and have included relevant modules in their existing curricula. This is particularly evident in the social sciences, while study programmes of technical faculties seem to be less focused on such actions. Higher education institutions also making efforts in providing to offer short trainings along various dimensions of soft skills to their students.

Croatian observations seem to be reflected in Polish private higher education reality. **Private University of Law and Administration located in Rzeszów** is founder of initiative called “The Soft Skills Academy”. The Soft Skills Academy is a workshop with representatives of “Work Group”, owner of the Pracuj.pl portal. During the classes at the Academy of Soft Skills, students are able to learn about the current trends in the labor market. They also learn what social and interpersonal skills and competences should be developed and how such skills can help in finding a good job. One of the elements of the training is also an introduction to the art of communication, presentation and negotiation, i.e. skills useful not only in professional work. Added value of this initiative, after completing the training, is giving an opportunity to interested students to consult their CVs and talk to the representatives of “Work Group”.

Another example of active private University is **Vistula University located in Warsaw** which offers to students’ different kinds of online webinars from the area of soft skills, for instance ‘Intercultural competences – are they needed in today’s labour market?’ or “Competences of the future”. Those online webinars are in Polish and English version as well.

Completed composite analysis proved that in all countries are conducted research studies from the area of soft skills and needs of students. The evidence from **Spain**, exactly from the **University of Barcelona** gives the employers' point of view on the subject in "Higher education and skills for employment. The employers' point of view"⁶⁹. In addition to generic skills, employers highlight the great importance of other types of skills "often rooted in one's own personality", and that, in general, they underline the capacity for commitment, the capacity for adaptation, analysis, organisation, decision making, communication and, above all, the capacity for teamwork.

In **Bulgaria**, soft skills development by HEIs, especially business schools, is seen in the larger context of close relationships with business incubators and accelerators, as providing international networking opportunities and entrepreneurial skills building, as the example above illustrates. Furthermore, various international projects consistently offer such opportunities for soft skills development in an entrepreneurial context while further focusing on local community and regional development in the framework of international cooperation (BSB-570 SILC ‘SILC Road local culture’ and "Silc Road Local Culture", 2021).

In turn **Italian** CRUI foundation has carried out a survey 17 on how Italian universities deal with soft skills. The questionnaire was administered in 2016 to 80 universities through an on-line filling-in procedure. The data collected in this survey show that, although it is still necessary to work on innovative teaching methods, the universities that answered the questionnaire confirm that they have activated training courses to support students in the development of soft skills. About 50%-60% of the responding universities state that they have activated 1 to 10 training activities in 2 years: only a smaller percentage activated more than 10 activities.

⁶⁹ University of Barcelona website: <https://www.ub.edu/web/portal/en/study/why-the-ub/employability/> (Accessed: 30.07.2021).

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At the beginning of this section, **Italy** was mentioned as an except in the context of strong representation of public universities in developing soft skills among students. It should be stressed out that public universities with long history and good reputation are engaged in process of soft skills awareness. The following Italian initiatives deserve attention:

- 1) **Alma Mater Studiorum - Università di Bologna:** The University has developed a series of courses that complete the academic path and enable students to acquire knowledge and skills on various topics such as entrepreneurship, creative thinking, employability, project management, etc.⁷⁰.
- 2) **Università di Torino – SkillCase:** SkillCase is an e-learning platform with multimedia teaching materials, exercises and tips to give students the opportunity to recognize and develop soft skills. The eight skills proposed on the platform (effective communication, goal and result orientation, organisation and planning, problem solving and solution finding, stakeholder orientation, teamworking, adaptation to change and self-empowerment) were selected throughout interviews with 500 students from 9 three-year and five-year degree courses at the Department of Political Culture and Society⁷¹.
- 3) **Politecnico di Milano – FLEXA:** FLEXA is a digital platform for a customised and continuous learning. By completing their profile, students will carry out an assessment of their hard, soft and digital skills, in order to identify their gaps and begin the “FLEXA Journey”. FLEXA is a digital mentor, enabling students to bridge⁷².
- 4) **Università degli Studi di Napoli – Federico II:** “COSO” is the soft skills course organized in nine theoretical lessons and four workshops, where students can participate in simulations, practical exercises and lectures about soft skill⁷³.
- 5) **University of Milan - Bicocca:** The University has developed a “Soft Skill Labs”, which is a project involving the collaboration of professionals and companies (Cesop, Assolombarda, Federmanager), aimed at creating training courses for the development of soft skills through tools and practical exercises⁷⁴.

As a result of the assessment, it can be indicated that there are large gaps in the scope of cooperation between higher education institutions and the environment. It is worth noting that in **Poland** can be observed continuous cooperation between stakeholders and higher education institutions, public and private as well. It is, in a way, dictated by the requirements of the Polish Ministry of Education and Science and it is the issue of periodic assessment of Polish Accreditation Committee which watches over the high quality of education in Poland.

As an example, it is used **Poznan University of Technology (Poland)** which have the external stakeholder’s council. It stayed at the Faculty of Electrical Engineering since 2015. The External Stakeholders' Council was also established, consisting of representatives of several companies, educational units and local authorities of Wielkopolska. The purpose of the council is to deepen cooperation between enterprises and institutions and the Faculty. External Stakeholders may initiate changes in education programs and give opinions on planned changes, in accordance with the Procedure for giving opinions and reporting changes in the education program by representatives of the External Stakeholder Council. Exactly the same example we can

⁷⁰ Alma Mater Studiorum - Università di Bologna website: <https://www.unibo.it/it/didattica/Innovazione-didattica/competenze-trasversali> (Accessed: 15.07.2021).

⁷¹ Università di Torino website: <https://elearning.unito.it/competenzetrasversali/> (Accessed: 16.07.2021).

⁷² Politecnico di Milano website: <https://www.som.polimi.it/flexa/> (Accessed: 16.07.2021).

⁷³ Università degli Studi di Napoli website: <https://www.unina.it/-/18507406-coso-corso-di-soft-skill->

⁷⁴ University of Milan - Bicocca website: <https://www.unimib.it/eventi/soft-skill-labs#:~:text=Soft%20Skill%20Labs%20%C3%A8%20un,proprio%20piano%20di%20auto%2Dsviluppo> (Accessed: 11.07.2021).

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observe in **Pedagogical University in Krakow**⁷⁵ and in **University of Information Technology and Management in Rzeszow**⁷⁶.

In **University of Information Technology and Management in Rzeszow (Poland)** can be found external stakeholders, including representatives of local employers and social organizations. Their main tasks include: giving opinions on programs education, teaching methods, assessment methods and other aspects related to quality education, advising faculty bodies on the development of the practical part the education process and participation in the education process (open lectures, classes specialist). Their objective view based on experience makes it possible to change study plans and add more courses around soft skills in the area of design thinking, critical thinking, resolving problem or communication ability.

Positive examples of developing soft skills among students and cooperation of external environment can be observed at the **University of Warsaw**. At this University is applied the project "**Application diploma theses - effective start professional**", under which students can apply the knowledge acquired during classes in practice. External partners - companies, public institutions and non-governmental organizations - may submit a need for research, and students of humanities and social sciences, under the supervision of the supervisor, prepare a diploma thesis proposing a solution to a specific problem. "Design is the answer on the need to prepare graduates for the practical use of knowledge at work, but also on growing demand for the exchange of data, knowledge and competences between the science sector and business, public institutions and NGOs.

Future competences should be shaped in a flexible educational ecosystem. The solution is greater university involvement in cooperation with other entities creating the educational ecosystem, especially with employers, public institutions and non-governmental organizations, and involving them in the process creating the content, form and purpose of the teaching mission university. This is important because in the context of a rapid technological change, the efficient functioning of the educational ecosystem, enabling employees to quickly and effectively acquire new competences and skills, becomes a determinant of the success.

4. Summary and findings

- ESSENCE project consortium agrees that there is a trend towards greater visibility of the importance of soft skills and their relation to successful employability. As it was mentioned before because of COVID-19 pandemic has been changed the work-life and direction was moved toward digitalization.
- In the opinion of the employers, young candidates for work in general lack of general competences: social (e.g. being communicative, easy establishing contacts, cooperation in a group, the ability to use the language in speech and writing) and self-organization, as well as creativity (understood as innovation and generating new solutions and ideas).
- The collaboration and implementation of the European network is seen as a key experience to ensure the exchange of best practices and mutual learning for the improvement of the "European Network of Public Employment Services".

⁷⁵ ResearchGate website: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309238387_Koncepcja_badan_opinii_interesariuszy_zewnetrznych_o_programie_studiow_na_kierunku_gospodarka_przestrzenna_jako_elementu_oceny_jakosci_ksztalcenia_na_przykladzie_Uniwersytetu_Pedagogicznego_w_Krakowie (Accessed: 11.07.2021).

⁷⁶ University of Information Technology and Management website: https://wsiz.pl/dokumenty/o_uczelni/informacje_o_nas/podstawa_prawna/wewnetrzny_system_zapewniania_jakosci_ksztalcenia.pdf (Accessed: 06.07.2021).

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- It is the most visible at the example of the third sector and the private sector, and from theoretical studies carried out by prestigious universities. Those institutions warning us to the importance of soft skills and their direct relation to employability in higher education. A positive factor is that a greater visibility of soft skills is being generated.
- Based on interviews and country reports we can stress out that other countries than Poland have lack of this activity and the role of external stakeholders in university life is marginalised. In this case, involving external stakeholders can be beneficial for both sides.
- It should be stressed that it is highly recommended the partnership and in-depth cooperation between HEI, Business and Government as well because only this cooperation will give the best outcomes to match future business requirements. As the analysis of the current work/study situation during the COVID-19 pandemic suggests, it is also necessary to motivate students to develop resilience, stress management, life-long learning strategies along with ‘traditional soft skills.’
- The private sector, which is much closer to the labour market, should support policy makers in the elaboration of the initiatives. They could be spokesmen for needs and challenges, collaborating with the public sector to identify effective programs. Sharing information about skills needs and ways to build employment pathways ensures an alignment between the vision of the public sector (and in particular policy makers) and the reality of the labour market.
- Collaboration remains the first step in improving the ecosystem. The public and private sectors need to align objectives in order to amplify the effectiveness of policies and the impact of investments. It is essential to develop a shared agenda, capable of aligning objectives and strategies to develop the skills of young people.
- In Bulgaria, universities have been encouraged by government incentives to establish partnerships with other EU HEIs and corporate organisations so that students can benefit from project work in soft skills development. This investment in human resources is also conducive to strengthening SMEs. Furthermore, an international project in soft skills development may multiply its impact factor not only by appropriate dissemination of its deliverables, but it may further encourage the culture of entrepreneurship. Bulgaria may certainly benefit as it is seriously lagging behind in the number of start-ups in comparison to the EU average.
- Analysis has shown, one of the sources for the development of competitive and up-to-date content in the field of soft skills is international cooperation in the framework of Erasmus+, European Social Fund and other European funding opportunities. This enables higher education institutions to improve and expand their soft skills content. While the popularity of these practices has been growing for several years, the number of projects dealing with the topic of soft skills development is rather limited. We were able to identify only a few projects in this area. Without a broader involvement of institutions in the development of soft skills teaching and training content the critical mass of individuals with such skills cannot be reached.
- Networked universities should play an important role in the educational ecosystem and actively cooperating with other entities. the quality of future competences education at universities should depends on investment in didactics and staff.

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- Innovation in teaching through increasing dialogue with institutions, universities and businesses the didactic offer of the universities could include micro courses increasing competences and developing skills valued in the market, work, such as the Innovation Designers workshop organized by PFR in cooperation with Google. Innovation in teaching through cooperation and the development of teaching-learning communities useful to support a dialogue with students.
- There is a lack of study of the specific field, and the studies that do exist are theoretical and somewhat scattered. Above all, there is a lack of joint work by all the intervening agents, educational, social, private and third sector entities, firstly to raise awareness of the importance of acquiring and improving soft skills in HE, in order to subsequently pool information on how to acquire and improve them, and to provide students with practical tools for their knowledge and development, which will benefit all the intervening sectors, as well as the personal, professional and social development of the individual, which in turn will have an impact on progress and development in economic terms. There is an urgent need to move from the theoretical to the dynamic study of these skills, so that these tools can serve the student as a guide for their acquisition and development.
- Development of professional skills in teachers. Creation of courses designed to improve teaching methods and knowledge of foreign languages. Allocation of funds to encourage and promote national and international mobility of teachers for the study of teaching methods and educational innovation.
- The company should carefully consider the most effective way of investing in training, in line with “corporate social responsibility” and competence needs. The training investment strategy should aim to maximise the value of human capital and consider short and long-term returns. In particular, if the investment strategy is successful, is encouraged a collaboration between companies, in order to exchange best practices in the training sector.
- Recruitment and learning strategies already developed in many companies should be modified having the situation of the younger professionals in mind. Companies can support young people in entering the world of work by developing a strategy to attract, recruit and develop employees from all kinds of academic/professional backgrounds.
- There is a lot of challenges to do: adopt the adult education system to the requirements of the labor market and prepare good offer of supplementary courses. Last, but not the least is to implement Western methods, especially in Polish university programs - design thinking, but also Google's design sprint or customer development although universities do not mobilize students enough to do more of thinking, they focus on theory instead of case studies, on the real one solving problems.

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Part no 3. Primary research on soft skills mapping

The mapping of soft skills with employability was carried out with the full involvement of the project consortium. According to the project guidelines, and thus the assumptions of the intellectual effect of IO2, project consortium approached the implementation of the indicated effect in several steps. The leader of the IO2 effect was the University of Information Technology and Management in Rzeszów (UITM) and the employees of the Institute for Financial Research and Analyses (IBAF) involved in the implementation of the ESSENCE project. UITM, as a leader, was responsible for defining a common methodology for all partners, enabling the design and implementation of the intellectual effect of IO2 in a unified manner in all partner countries. Such a solution was necessary from the point of view of the comparability of the collected source materials and the formulation of coherent research conclusions based on them.

An extremely important issue from the point of view of soft skills mapping was the division of tasks and the corresponding perspectives in the research procedure. This allowed the project consortium to achieve the desired synergy effect. According to the design, IWS was responsible for mapping soft skills in Spain and providing input to IO2 from the perspective of the enterprise and informal knowledge provider for higher education in the fields of communication, ICT and digital entrepreneurship. The University of Dubrovnik (UNIDU), the Stockholm School of Economics in Riga (SSE Riga) and the University of Economics in Varna focused on analyses covering the perspective of academic teachers and broadly defined higher education. The IDP was tasked with mapping Italy and contributing to the draft opinion on the dynamics of soft skills in terms of employability perception in the private sector by offering its unique 'target group point of view' of SMEs. The IHF was responsible for extending the scope of IO2 at the European Union (EU) level by involving international and EU actors in identifying trends in soft skills. To this end, the IHF examined European institutions and agencies (the EU Commission, the EU SME Agency, the EU Parliament), as well as international actors (OECD, UNDP, etc.) with knowledge of soft skills and their role in today's labor markets. The role of UITM was to map soft skills within its scientific knowledge and to combine the research results of the consortium members in the form of documents reporting individual components of work on IO2.

1. Research issue background and context

The first step in research procedure was the review of secondary sources. Literature studies were aimed not only at building methodological foundations for the correct design of research. Their aim was also to ensure the substantive correctness of the design of the research tools and the proper focusing of the center of gravity in the field of research on the explanation of the scientific problem presented in the project.

The research covered literature, analytical studies, research results and thematic websites, as well as previously published reports and expert opinions devoted to the identification of the most sought-after soft skills among job candidates. A total of 324 documents corresponding to the above-mentioned categories were examined. Using the above-mentioned division of perspectives in the research procedure, IDP and IHF identified and analyzed 79 and 88 secondary sources, respectively. IWS collected and researched 24 sources reflecting the point of view of the SME sector. The last group of institutions forming the consortium represented the perspective of higher education. UITM collected, verified and assessed 60 secondary sources, the University of Varna - 35, UNIDU - 28, and SSE Riga - 10 thematic studies (see Table 1).

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Table 1. The results of literature research, analysis of documents and studies dedicated to the connection of soft skills and employment in the countries forming the consortium

Country	Total	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
IT	79	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	10	1	8	11	12	25	12
BE	88	0	0	0	0	0	0	12	0	3	10	10	19	30	4
ES	24	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	6	3	4	10
LV	10	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	2	3	2
PL	60	0	0	1	1	2	1	3	7	2	6	7	14	14	2
HR	28	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	4	8	7	5
BG	35	0	0	1	0	0	1	3	2	1	2	4	8	10	3

Source: Own elaboration.

The diverse number of source materials dedicated to soft skills and employment chances identified among the participating countries, explains to some extent the disproportions in the size of these countries. It is hard to expect that the scale of research on linking soft skills with employment opportunities in Poland will be the same as in Latvia, which is nearly 20 times smaller in terms of population. A smaller number of people is accompanied by a smaller number of universities, research centers, advisory institutions, and thus a smaller amount of not only scientific research, but also various types of studies dedicated to the problem under study.

The analysis performed showed that the number of publications dedicated to this issue is gradually increasing. For the last 3 years covered by the study, 61% of the total number of documents published on this subject in partner countries, and the publishing and research achievements for the last 4 years constitute as much as 74% of the total identified publications dedicated to the soft skills and employability union. Thus, the project Enhance Soft Skills to Nurture Competitiveness and Employability (ESSENCE) not only fits in with the current research trends, but, more importantly, fills the cognitive gap identified in this regard. Thanks to this, the findings made on its basis will have an application value both from the perspective of higher education and public and private institutions, but also representatives of the sector of small and medium-sized enterprises, whose representation was also included in the project.

The conducted review of research works and other source materials collected and analyzed during desk research allowed for setting the basis for the development of a questionnaire for the implementation of basic research. The questionnaire consisted of fourteen closed questions (eight substantive and six otherd), nine of which gave the possibility of inserting an additional answer in a situation where the attached set was not sufficient for the participant to take a position.

The first question concerned the identification of soft skills which, according to the respondents, increase the chances of employment. They were supplemented with another question requiring the indication of soft skills that are missing from candidates for positions in the surveyed organization. Both questions were essential from the point of view of the research problem under consideration, and at the same time they formed the basis for further indications and assessments, the interpretation of which was carried out in a cross-way with respect to the remaining questions and the answers attached to them. The third question concerned the ability to reduce the deficits of soft skills identified in people taking up employment in the analyzed organization. Three subsequent survey questions related to the above issue. The fourth question was to determine whether a given organization offers formal training for new employees in the field of soft skills. If the answer was yes, the fifth question asked to indicate the subject of these trainings, and if they were missing, the sixth question asked to indicate the reason why this type of training activity is not offered

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in the surveyed organization. The seventh question provided knowledge about the methods on the basis of which the organization recognizes training needs or identifies the lack of training needs in the field of soft skills among employees. The last, eighth, substantive question related to determining how the surveyed organization perceives conducting trainings devoted to soft skills for its employees. Thanks to this, it was possible to determine to what extent this type of activity is treated by the surveyed entities as an investment in the development of their team, and to what extent it is perceived in terms of unnecessary (unjustified) costs.

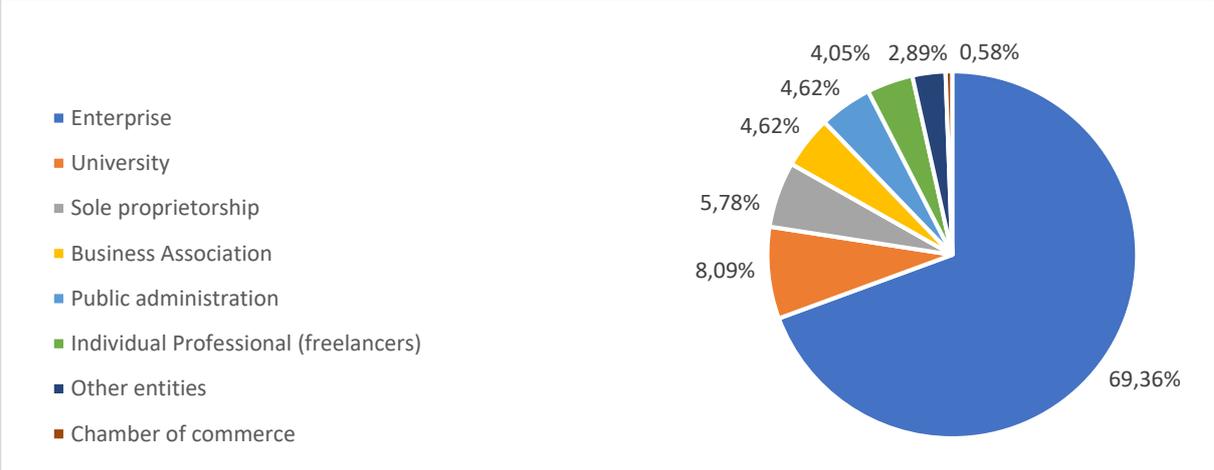
Questions numbered nine to fourteen (inclusive) made up the score sheet. In the ninth question the type of the analyzed organization was identified, in the tenth question its size, and the eleventh question provided knowledge about the economic sector represented by the organization participating in the research. The twelfth question made it possible to identify the country that was represented by the examined entity. As the country where the organization is located may not always be equated with the sole place of business, the thirteenth question examined whether the entity represented in the study operates only in the country where it is established. If the answer is negative, the fourteenth question proposes a set of countries in which activities are conducted outside the country of location. The option to indicate a country outside the list included in the questionnaire was also left.

The questionnaire developed in the above-described way was verified by friendly economic organizations, sector associations, business environment institutions and higher education institutions, and the collected information was used to improve the survey and ensure its substantive correctness in the field of research on the relationship between soft skills and opportunities for employment.

2. Structure of the research sample

The project estimates that basic research will be conducted on a sample of 100 entities representing the public and private sectors. Due to the interest in the research organized by the consortium, 173 questionnaires with answers were collected, thus exceeding the project assumptions by 70%.

Figure 1. Generic categories of entities participating in the study



Source: Own elaboration.

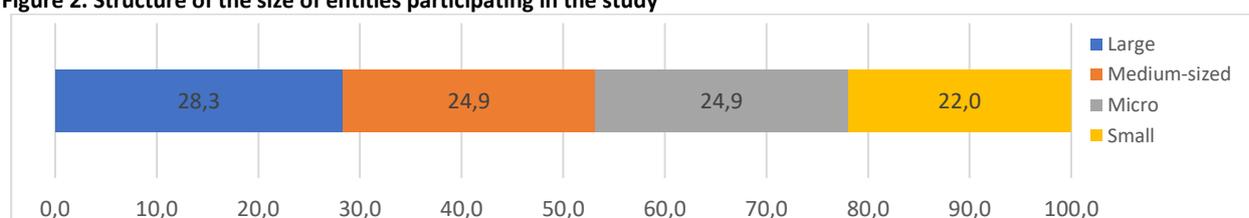
120 enterprises (i.e. 69,36% of the research sample), 14 universities (8,09%) and 10 sole proprietorships (5,78%) participated in the study. The structure of the research sample also included 8 business associations (4,62%), 8 public administration units (4,62%) and 7 representatives of liberal professions (4,05%). The

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remaining group consisted of 5 entities (i.e. 2,89%) representing, inter alia, an employment agency, an office of international organizations and a research institution (see Figure 1).

The distribution presented above provided the basis for the implementation of the design assumptions. The collected information reflected the perspective of both higher education and the labor market, and supplementing it with the indications of other participants of the survey made it possible to retain the desired diversification of the sample from the research point of view.

Figure 2. Structure of the size of entities participating in the study



Source: Own elaboration.

The structure of the research sample included 49 large entities (i.e. 28,3% of the research sample), 43 medium entities (i.e. 24,9%), 38 small entities (i.e. 22,0%) and 43 micro entities (i.e. 24,9%). Repeatedly, it should be acknowledged that the structure of the research sample does not raise any objections due to the size class of the examined entity. It is dominated by micro, small and medium-sized entities, which altogether constitute 71,7% of entities covered by the study. Therefore, it can be assumed that the large entities representing the smallest market share were not underestimated in the study. On the contrary - the proportion preserved in the study reflects the market structure of the participants in economic relations.

Table 2 presents the structure of the research sample as to the sector of the economy (based on the PKD classification) represented by the examined entity.

Table 2. Structure of the research sample due to the represented sector of the national economy

Classification of economic activities	Number	(in %)
Education	28	16,18%
Other service activities	19	10,98%
Manufacturing	18	10,40%
Information and communication	15	8,67%
Wholesale and retail trade; motor vehicle repair, including motorcycles	14	8,09%
Financial and insurance activities	13	7,51%
Construction	11	6,36%
Professional, scientific and technical activity	11	6,36%
Activities related to accommodation and gastronomic services	9	5,20%
Administrative and supporting activities	8	4,62%
Health care and social welfare	6	3,47%
Activities related to culture, entertainment and recreation	5	2,89%
Public administration and defense; mandatory social security	5	2,89%
Activities relating to the real estate market	5	2,89%
Agriculture, forestry, hunting and fishing	2	1,16%
Exterritorial organizations and teams	2	1,16%
Generation and supply of electricity, gas, water steam, hot water and air for air-conditioning systems	1	0,58%
Households employing workers; households producing products and services for their own	1	0,58%
Total	173	100,00%

Source: Own elaboration.

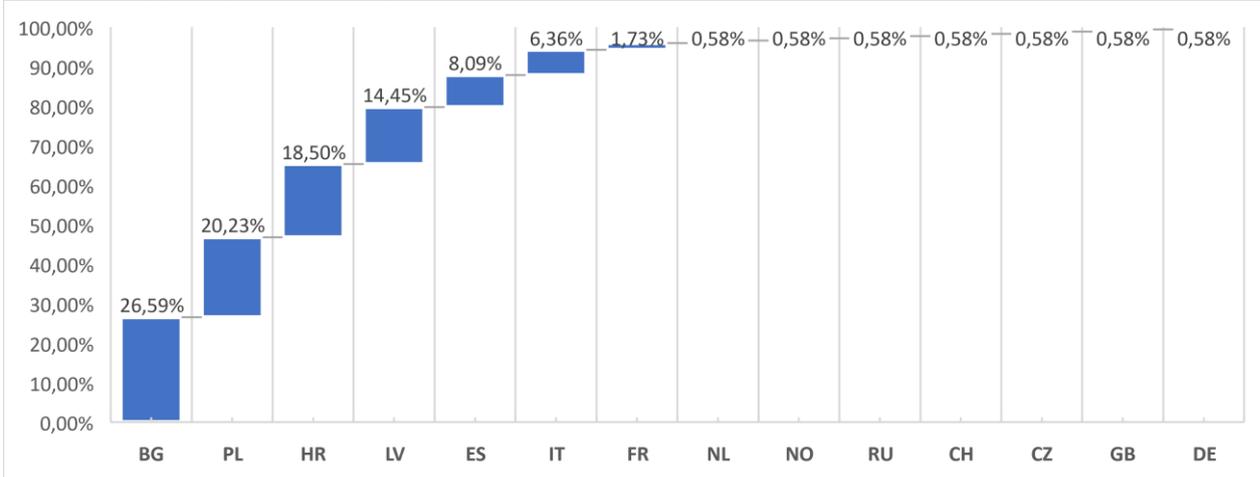
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The largest share in the research sample was held by educational institutions (16,18%), followed by: other service activities (10,98%) and industrial processing (10,40%). A slightly smaller percentage of participants described entities representing information and communication (8,67%), and professional, scientific and technical activities (6,36%). The PKD sections representing households producing goods and providing services for their own needs (0,58%), as well as electricity, gas and water production and supply (0,58%) were definitely the least numerous.

The structure of the survey participants presented above corresponded to the implementation of the assumed project goals. It reflects the structure of entities that shape the market of services including soft skills to the greatest extent, both from the educational perspective and the practice of using them in business. The potential of the research sample is also determined by the fact that the characteristics of its entities representing the enterprise sector include both advanced services and scientific and technical activities, as well as industrial processing, real estate market and trade. The resulting connection of entities indicates, on the one hand, the universal nature and importance of soft skills in the functioning of the surveyed enterprises, and at the same time, due to the proportions describing the size of the surveyed entities, it indicates for which types of economic activity the importance of soft skills is greater, and in which - although important, it does not prevail over industry qualifications.

Both entities from the countries representing the consortium and from other countries (including France, Great Britain, Germany and Norway) participated in the survey. The largest share in the research sample of entities from the countries forming the project consortium belonged to Bulgaria (46 entities), Poland (35 entities) and Croatia (32 entities). An insignificantly smaller group was characteristic of Latvia (25 entities), and the smallest group was Italy (11 entities). None of the survey participants indicated Belgium as the location of their activities (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Survey participants by country



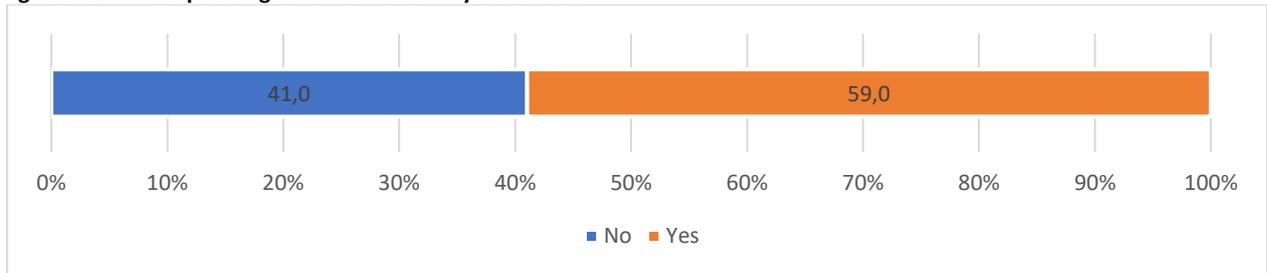
Source: Own elaboration.

The surveyed entities were also asked whether they operate outside the country of their location. The results of the research indicated that nearly 60% of the respondents were active also outside the place where they had their seat (see Figure 4). This aspect is extremely interesting and cognitively important, because it allows for the assessment not only from the perspective of an entity operating in one country, but also from the point of view of the possibility of transferring certain solutions in the field of the use of soft skills between the countries in which the activity is conducted and the identification of potential difficulties related to this fact.



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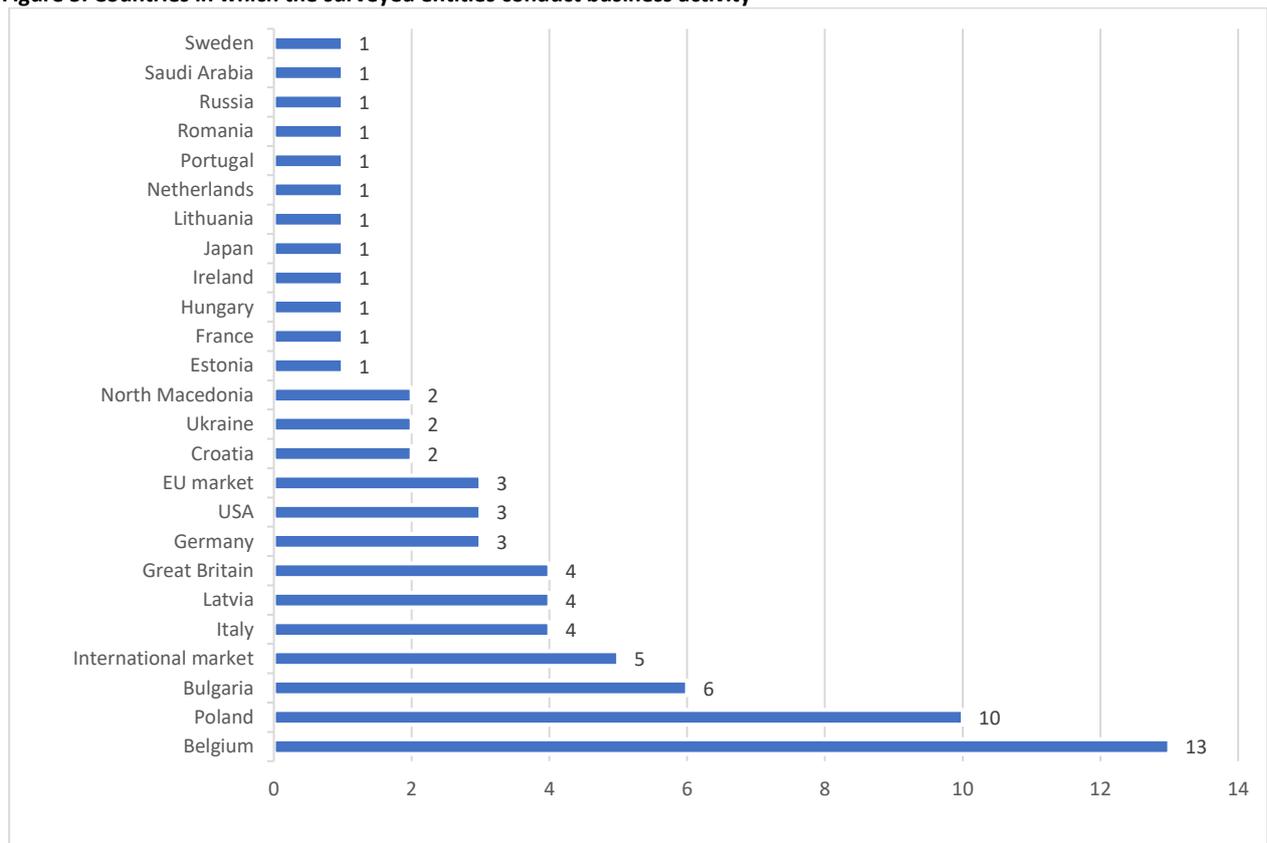
Figure 4. Entities operating outside the country of location



Source: Own elaboration.

The research findings presented in Figure 4 served as the basis for asking the question of in which locations and on which markets the activity of entities declaring operating outside the domestic market is conducted. Figure 5 is an illustration of the collected responses. By far the largest number of entities declaring activities outside the country of location indicated Belgium (13 responses), and then Poland (10 responses). As many as 58 (i.e. 79,45%) out of 73 entities declaring their activity outside the country of registration indicated the European market. The remaining 1/5 of the indications included both precisely specified locations (e.g. Russia, Saudi Arabia, or the USA), as well as responses suggesting operating on a broadly defined international market.

Figure 5. Countries in which the surveyed entities conduct business activity



Source: Own elaboration.

The research trial designed as described above made it possible to conduct comprehensive research enabling the collection of information necessary to map soft skills increasing the employability of students and university graduates in the countries forming the project consortium. Importantly, the diffusion of the

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knowledge generated in this way has a chance to bring benefits not only to the countries involved in the project, but also to all users using the material developed by the consortium and its conclusions.

3. Research findings in the field of soft skills mapping

The first question was to determine which soft skills, in the opinion of the respondents, increase the chances of employment. According to Table 3, the most responses included: communication and cooperation (113), creativity (103), emotional intelligence (100), evaluation and decision making (90), as well as ex aequo critical thinking (82) and complex problem solving (82).

Table 3. Soft skills increasing employability

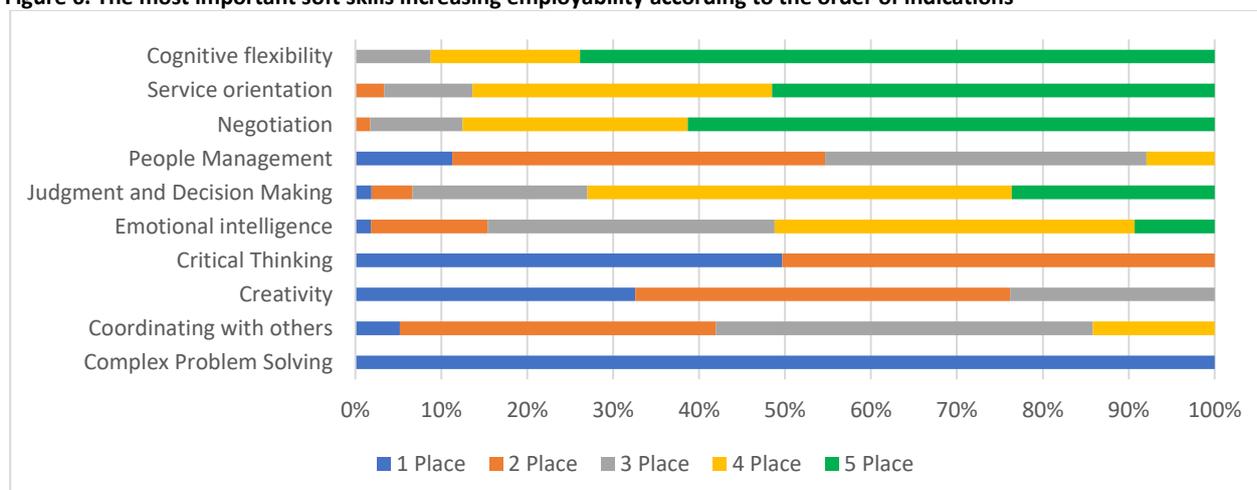
Softskills	Frequency of indications according to positions 1 to 5					Total 1-5	%
	Pos. 1	Pos. 2	Pos. 3	Pos. 4	Pos. 5		
Complex problem solving	82					82	10,6%
Critical thinking	41	41				82	10,6%
Creativity	34	45	24			103	13,3%
People management	5	19	16	3		43	5,5%
Coordinating with others	6	42	50	14	1	113	14,5%
Emotional intelligence	2	15	36	40	7	100	12,9%
Judgement and decision making	2	5	21	45	17	90	11,6%
Service orientation		2	6	18	21	47	6,0%
Negotiation		1	6	13	24	44	5,7%
Cognitive flexibility			8	14	47	69	8,9%
Depends on Job requirements	1					1	0,1%
Ability to receive feedback			1			1	0,1%
Sense of humor					1	1	0,1%
Taking responsibility					1	1	0,1%
No response		3	5	26	54	88	11,3%
Total	173	173	173	173	173	777*	100,0%

*It was possible to choose more than one answer.

Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 6 presented below illustrates the most important soft skills increasing employability, in the order of respondents' indications.

Figure 6. The most important soft skills increasing employability according to the order of indications



Source: Own elaboration.

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As the first indication of the most important soft skill, complex problem solving was by far the most frequently chosen. Creativity dominated the second place. The third place was for communication and cooperation. In turn, the most popular indications in the fourth and fifth places were, respectively: judgement and decision-making, and cognitive flexibility.

Respondents also chose answers not included in the catalog contained in the survey. However, these were isolated cases. They concerned, inter alia, ability to receive feedback and accountability. The analysis of the sectoral structure of collected responses showed that emotional intelligence is ranked as the highest among representatives of the financial and insurance sectors, while evaluating and making decisions is especially valued by industrial processing. The remaining (indicated above) key soft skills were chosen by employees of the education sector. It is also important that people management was rated as much more important among small entities, while negotiation and cognitive flexibility - among micro entities. The research findings also showed that while businesses and chambers of commerce value communication and collaboration the most, and those involved in education - critical thinking, creativity is most important for sole proprietorships and emotional intelligence for individual professionals.

The second question in the survey related to the identification of soft skills which, in the opinion of respondents, are missing by candidates for positions in the surveyed organizations. According to the data contained in Table 4, the most common deficiencies are the skills of complex problem solving, communication and cooperation, as well as emotional intelligence, judgement and decision-making. Only one indication referred to the lack of soft skills among job applicants, and the candidates' service orientation and negotiation skills are relatively good.

Table 4. Soft skills that are lacking among job applicants

Soft skills	Frequency of indications according to positions					Total 1-5	%
	Pos. 1	Pos. 2	Pos. 3	Pos. 4	Pos. 5		
Complex problem solving	81					81	13,0%
Critical thinking	24	21				45	7,2%
Creativity	20	34	8			62	10,0%
People management	17	24	15	2		58	9,3%
Coordinating with others	19	29	23	9		80	12,9%
Emotional intelligence	6	26	25	17	3	77	12,4%
Judgement and decision-making	2	17	26	17	12	74	11,9%
Service orientation	2	6	12	11	7	38	6,1%
Negotiation	1	6	8	15	14	44	7,1%
Cognitive flexibility		2	23	13	21	59	9,5%
Candidates do not lack skills	1					1	0,2%
Sense of humor			1			1	0,2%
Responsibility				1		1	0,2%
No response		8	32	88	116	244	39,3%
Total	173	173	173	173	173	621*	100,0%

*It was possible to choose more than one answer.

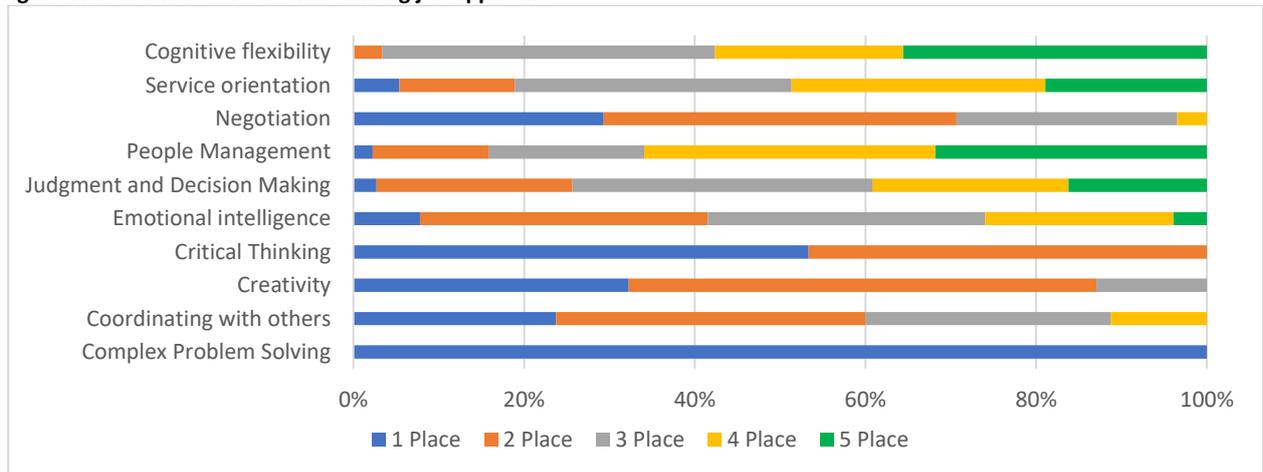
Source: Own elaboration.

As the first indication, respondents most often chose complex problem solving, then creativity, judgement and decision-making, and then emotional intelligence and cognitive flexibility (see Figure 7). While the greatest deficiencies in the field of emotional intelligence concern candidates for work in large and medium-sized organizations, communication and cooperation is the main problem for people applying for jobs in small organizations, and complex problem solving in micro entities.

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Representatives of the education, IT and communication and industrial processing sectors point to the shortages of soft skills, which include complex problem solving. The education, financial and insurance sectors confirm deficiencies in job applicants in terms of emotional intelligence. Representatives of the activity related to accommodation and catering services indicate that the greatest deficit of soft skills concerns communication and cooperation.

Figure 7. Deficiencies of soft skills among job applicants



Source: Own elaboration.

The study found that creativity was the greatest soft skill shortage in public administration and business associations. Representatives of the educational sector identify emotional intelligence as deficient, and individual specialists - judgement and decision-making. On the other hand, representatives of enterprises and sole proprietorships agree that the greatest shortcomings in soft skills of job applicants concern complex problem solving.

The next question was aimed to determine whether the above-identified deficiencies in the field of soft skills among job candidates can be eliminated after taking up employment. As many as 114 respondents (i.e. 65,9% of the respondents) indicated the answer in the affirmative. It is also important that deficit reduction was mainly the domain of large enterprises (28,32% of yes), then ex aequo of medium and micro entities (24,86% each), and to the least extent of small entities (21,97% of responses). Representatives of the educational sector, services, industrial processing as well as IT and communication declare the greatest opportunities to reduce the shortages of soft skills after employment. The cross-section taking into account the organizational structure proves that entrepreneurs running more complex forms of economic activity see the greatest opportunities to reduce the deficits of soft skills, and the lowest (among people who chose the negative answer) - persons operating in the form of sole proprietorships.

Bearing in mind the above-mentioned answers, study attempted to determine whether the participating organizations offer formal training for new employees in the field of soft skills. Interestingly, while the answers to question number three suggested that the respondents saw the possibility of bridging the shortages in the field of soft skills after taking up employment, 72,83% did not propose formal training in soft skills to new employees (see Table 5). Only 9,83% of the respondents indicate that formal training in soft skills is organized for all new employees. It means, therefore, that organizations look out for activity on the side of employees themselves in the field of elimination of shortages in soft skills.

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Table 5. Formal soft skills training for new employees offered by the organization

Formalne szkolenia z zakresu umiejętności miękkich	Frequency	%
Yes, there is a formal soft skills training for all new employees	17	9,83%
Yes, there is a formal soft skills training for some of the new employees (based on selection process recommendations / based on the job requirements for the position)	19	10,98%
Yes, there is a formal soft skills training for the new employees who want to participate in such training	11	6,36%
There is no formal soft skills training for the new employees	126	72,83%
Total	173	100,00%

Source: Own elaboration.

If such training is introduced, it is mainly carried out in large enterprises. Their conduct was confirmed by 14,29% of entities operating in the sector of other services. The lowest number of such initiatives is undertaken in small enterprises (only 2,63% of responses). Training for some new employees, organized on the basis of recommendations resulting from the selection process and requirements for work in a given position, is most often offered by entities conducting activities related to culture, entertainment and recreation, as well as entities operating in the area of wholesale and retail trade. Enterprises (compared to other organizational forms examined) are at the same time the largest group declaring the lack of this type of training. The second in this respect are entities operating in the education sector, followed by business associations and sole proprietorships.

The most frequently organized trainings in the field of soft skills concern communication and cooperation. It is worth emphasizing that these trainings are dominant regardless of the size of the examined entity (see Table 6). They are mainly carried out by enterprises from the service, IT and communication sector, as well as entities providing services related to accommodation and food services. Training in negotiation, service orientation, judgement and decision-making is offered much less frequently. Cognitive flexibility and critical thinking are definitely the least frequently organized trainings.

Table 6. Topics of training for new employees in the field of soft skills offered by the organization

Topics of training in the field of soft skills	Frequency	%
Complex problem solving	14	8,09%
Coordinating with others	36	20,81%
Creativity	12	6,94%
Critical thinking	8	4,62%
People management	14	8,09%
Service orientation	19	10,98%
Emotional intelligence	14	8,09%
Judgement and decision-making	18	10,40%
Negotiation	20	11,56%
Cognitive flexibility	7	4,05%
Customer service	1	0,58%
Depends on Job requirements	1	0,58%
Dependent on job requirements, company needs and assets offered by the employee	1	0,58%
No response	8	4,62%
Total	173	100,00%

Source: Own elaboration.

Large organizations mainly conduct training in negotiation and then service orientation. On the other hand, medium-sized entities organize training in people management and (similarly to micro-entities) in judgement and decision making.

The organizational cross-section of entities subject to the study showed that formal training in soft skills for new employees is most often offered by enterprises with complex organizational and legal forms regulated

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by the Commercial Code (81,48% of entities offering this type of support). In the next place, but with over nine times lower percentage of responses (8,64%), there were sole proprietorships, followed by individual specialists (4,94% of responses) and entities representing public administration and the education (2,47 % of indications).

Organizations which confirmed in the survey that they do not conduct training for newly hired employees were asked what was the reason for this. The results of research findings are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Reasons for the lack of organization of soft skills training for new employees

Reasons for the lack of training in soft skills	Frequency	%
Due to workload, there is no time to conduct training for employees	48	42,11%
Training is provided informally, i.e. in the form of feedback, guidance, job shadowing	43	37,72%
Emphasis is placed on on-the-job training (by the direct supervision of the management), even though the method is not the most effective one	3	1,75%
Employees do not have time to attend courses (too much work)	2	2,63%
Employees have access to free online materials	2	1,75%
Soft skills are the kind of competencies that an employee must have and develop on their own	2	1,75%
Trainings are organized later than during the first 3 months of work	2	1,75%
Employees do not need training	1	0,88%
Soft skills training is of no use	1	0,88%
Training covers all employees after the trial period	1	0,88%
Only team leaders are trained	1	0,88%
Training is scheduled for fall each year	1	0,88%
Company is not interested in this type of investment	1	0,88%
Lack of vision for learning and professional development on the side of management board	1	0,88%
Probably company perceives them as unnecessary	1	0,88%
Soft skills training is not prioritized by HR/organization (company has tight training budget)	1	0,88%
No response	3	2,63%
Total	114*	100,00%

*The total sum of responses informing about the lack of organized trainings is available in questionnaire no. 3.

Source: Own elaboration.

The two most common reasons for the lack of training in soft skills for new employees are too much workload for people who could provide such training and upgrading skills in soft skills through informal training. Both reasons jointly accounted for 81,98% of the reasons for the lack of dedicated training in this field. The reason why the surveyed entities do not organize training dedicated to soft skills is also conducting direct supervision over the work of employees and correcting errors that are noticed on an ongoing basis, too much workload on employees which does not allow them to participate in training, and the position according to which the development of soft skills should be done on their own.

Only single indications suggested the lack of interest of the surveyed entities in the organization of this type of training for employees, focus on training of team leaders only and too tight training budget. Despite the fact that none of the respondents directly indicated that training is too expensive (by default in relation to the effects obtained through it), the selected answers allow us to believe that this is one of the reasons for the lack of interest in improving soft skills of employees. The lack of awareness of the benefits of this type of training for organizations, which is also indirectly indicated by the responses of the survey participants, is also disturbing.

All the reasons listed in Table 7 were predominantly in the domain of enterprises. Nevertheless, the analysis of the survey results showed that representatives of public administration do not conduct training for employees due to the workload. Instead of traditional training in administration, non-formal training is offered.

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Similar explanations for the lack of training are indicated by employees of the education sector, business associations and sole proprietorships. The reason for the lack of training in soft skills in the education sector is also the excessive workload of employees, as well as the belief that soft skills are competences that an employee must have and develop independently. Representatives of liberal professions present an analogous view.

The workload of potential trainers (e.g. employees with more experience) is most often mentioned by micro companies as the reason for the lack of training in the field of soft skills. Micro and small entities, as well as large ones confirm that informal training courses are conducted instead of traditional ones. On the other hand, medium-sized organizations indicate that the reason for the lack of organization of this type of training is the workload of employees, which prevents them from participating in this type of training. Industry indications supplement the above results. Most often, non-formal training (as a substitute for traditional training) is offered by entities dealing with education, finance and insurance, as well as information and communication.

A further development of the obtained results was the question of how the respondents recognize the need or lack of the need for training in the field of soft skills among their employees. The basic research findings are presented in Table 8.

Table 8. Recognition of training needs in the field of soft skills among employees

Ways of identifying training needs	Frequency	%
Based on employee self-assessment	45	25,28%
Based on peer review	33	18,54%
Based on supervisor assessment	31	17,42%
Waiting for employees to report their needs	4	2,25%
Interviews with individual employees	13	7,30%
Observation of employees' daily work	46	25,84%
By research: Feedback360	2	1,12%
Feedback from customers	2	1,12%
Team atmosphere	1	0,56%
Employee engagement research	1	0,56%
Total	178*	100,00%

*It was possible to choose more than one answer.

Source: Own elaboration.

The basic methods of identifying the training needs of employees are the observation of everyday work (25,84% of indications) and employee self-assessment (25,28% of indications). The peer assessment and the supervisor's assessment are on the next places. The rarest approach is waiting for the employee to signal his interest in participating in the training (only 2,25% of responses). The respondents also indicated the use of other methods in identifying training needs (e.g. the Feedback360 study or customer feedback). Nevertheless, these responses were marginal, which proves their insignificant importance in identifying training needs in the field of soft skills in the surveyed organizations.

Observation of daily work is a method of identifying training needs, which is most often used in gastronomy and accommodation, education and other services. In the last two types of activity, self-assessment is also used relatively often (compared to other methods). Peer review is used in financial and insurance services. On the other hand, the supervisor's assessment is the basis for identifying training needs in the field of soft skills in ICT entities and professional, scientific and technical activities. In other services, however, methods such as the Feedback360 survey, team climate survey or employee engagement survey are used.

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Small and medium-sized entities (in particular enterprises) most often diagnose training needs by observing the daily work of the employed team. For this purpose, large organizations use self-assessment and peer assessment. In turn, micro entities (including sole proprietorships) are based on the assessment of their superiors. The situation is similar in public administration. Professionals rely on self-esteem.

The research findings presented so far have been extended to the perception of soft skills training by the surveyed entities (see Table 9). The vast majority of respondents (i.e. 37,57%), regardless of their size (micro, small, medium or large entities), perceive this type of training as a benefit for the organization. Among the respondents, this type of training is also treated as the organisation's responsibility to the employee (i.e. 15,61%). Slightly over 15% of responses expressed the opinion that such activity is a cost for the organization, and less than 12% referred interested parties to online materials.

Table 9. Perception by the organization of training in the field of soft skills

Opinions of the respondents on soft skills training	Frequency	%
An advantage for the organization	65	37,57%
Cost for the organization	26	15,03%
The organization's responsibility for the employee	27	15,61%
There are so many free materials on the web - those who are interested will find it	20	11,56%
The employee's liability to the organization	18	10,40%
Unnecessary time consumer	10	5,78%
Institution is not interested in this type of training	1	0,58%
Lots of soft skills trainings are available, but depending on how they are applied opinions differ between 'unnecessary time consumer' and 'employment benefit'	1	0,58%
We believe that people need experience to train soft skills and the best way to gain it is through work and experiencing real-life situations. We provide guidance to employees. Of course, formal training would also benefit the organization.	1	0,58%
We do not believe that this kind of training would be helpful	1	0,58%
It is a matter of personal choice of the organization and job candidate	1	0,58%
Our organization focuses mainly on technical competences	1	0,58%
Such training is a waste of time. It is more advantageous to send employees to hard skills trainings	1	0,58%
Total	173	100,00%

Source: Own elaboration.

The study showed that only slightly more than 10 responses assessed the legitimacy of this type of training directly negatively, justifying their opinion with the greater legitimacy of organizing technical (industrial) training and the lack of conviction about the effectiveness of training dedicated to soft skills. This position was most often expressed by small entities.

Training in soft skills is considered in terms of benefits for the organization in entities representing, inter alia, culture, entertainment and recreation, professional, scientific and technical activities, ICT, as well as finance and insurance. They are an obligation of the employee in the accommodation and catering industry, while in retail and other services they are seen as an obligation of the organization to the employee. This situation applies to both large and medium-sized entities and micro entities.

In the enterprise sector, training in soft skills is seen as a benefit for the organization, but also as a bilateral commitment - on the one hand, the employee towards the organization, and on the other, the organization towards the employee. Training in the above-mentioned area is also appreciated by representatives of public administration, representatives of liberal professions (individual specialists) and persons running sole proprietorships. Also, training in soft skills is a cost for organizations from the perspective of representatives of the education sector.

4. Summary and findings

The conducted survey research aimed at mapping soft skills and their relationship with employability has produced a lot of valuable information. Diversified in terms of industry and sector, and at the same time an international research sample, the obtained results are of a cross-sectional character and allow for the construction of interesting conclusions on the role of soft skills in the contemporary labor market. The most important research findings are presented synthetically in the following sections.

- According to the respondents, soft skills that most significantly increase employment opportunities are: (1) Communication and cooperation, (2) Creativity, (3) Emotional intelligence, (4) Judgement and decision-making, (5) Complex problem solving, (6) Critical Thinking, and (7) Cognitive Flexibility. Importantly, the above-mentioned skills (with the exception of critical thinking) were presented by the respondents as those whose deficit is most often shown by candidates for work in the surveyed organizations.
- The fact that the vast majority of the respondents confirm that deficits of soft skills are effectively reduced in the course of work speaks in favor of making efforts towards training initiatives dedicated to the improvement of soft skills. Thus, despite their absence at the stage of employment, the gaps in soft skills are successfully reduced both by participating in formal training courses organized by the employer, as well as by self-improvement based on online source materials.
- The vast majority of respondents do not offer formal training for new employees. Considering the above-mentioned legitimacy of initiatives for the improvement of soft skills and their proven effectiveness, it should be noted that the development of training materials dedicated to the issues discussed is desirable not only from an empirical but also from a practical point of view.
- The entities that confirmed the provision of training dedicated to soft skills constituted the minority of the surveyed organizations. According to the indications, respondents focused on topics related to the profile of their current activities and covered such aspects as: communication and cooperation, negotiations, service orientation, judgement and decision making.
- The main reasons why the surveyed organizations did not conduct training dedicated to soft skills were: the workload (of people with more experience) making it impossible to conduct training for new employees and support in improving soft skills through informal training (i.e. in the form of feedback, giving tips, observation of the work of experienced employees).
- The two most common channels for identifying training needs in the field of soft skills are: observation of employees' daily work by superiors and employee self-assessment. Much less often, the identification of deficits in the field of soft skills takes place through the supervision of the superior and on the basis of peer assessment. The very small percentage of indications confirming the diagnosis of training needs through individual interviews with employees should be considered unsatisfactory.
- Most of the respondents perceive training dedicated to the development of soft skills in terms of benefits for the organization. It is worth emphasizing that the respondents perceive this type of initiative both as an element of the organization's responsibility for the employee and an element of the employee's responsibility towards the organization. This finding confirms that involvement in the training process, both from the perspective of its initiation and implementation, constitutes a kind of bilateral obligation of the parties to the employment relationship. The effectiveness of this type of undertaking

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depends not only on the correct identification of the deficits of soft skills, but also the awareness of the possibility of eliminating them through appropriately selected training proposals.

- The soft skills desired in the market are subject to differentiation due to the analyzed sector of the economy, the type of activity (industry), and the size of the analyzed entity. Educational tools dedicated to the development of soft skills should, in their structure, substantive scope and form, take into account the specificity of the target group.
- Employers, when undertaking initiatives to improve soft skills of their employees, should be guided in the selection of training topics by the indicated attributes of size, sector and industry in which their entity operates. A fully conscious selection of instruments and topics will allow not only to maximize the obtained effects, but also to minimize the costs associated with increasing and developing soft skills among employees.
- Considering the fact that a significant percentage of entities participating in the study declare that they conduct business outside the place of the formal location, the identified cognitive findings (under certain conditions) can also be effectively applied outside the countries forming the project consortium.

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Annex

SURVEY ON MAPPING SOFT SKILLS WITH EMPLOYABILITY

This questionnaire is carried out as part of the "Enhance Soft Skills to Nurture Competitiveness and Employability" project, financed by the Erasmus + Program (KA2 - Cooperation for innovation and exchange of good practices, KA203 - Strategic Partnerships for higher education). The project is implemented in a partnership of 7 institutions representing SME sector, higher education and advisory institutions located in the EU countries. Its aim is to map soft skills, which in the opinion of employees, entrepreneurs, and business environment institutions, are desirable for employees and increase employability. The statements presented in the questionnaire are anonymous (they will not be combined with the company providing them) and will be used only for research purposes under the project. Please provide credible answers.

1. In your opinion, having which of the following soft skills increases employability? (Select maximum top five skills).

Soft Skills	Answers
a. Complex Problem Solving	
b. Critical Thinking	
c. Creativity	
d. People Management	
e. Coordinating with others	
f. Emotional intelligence	
g. Judgment and Decision Making	
h. Service orientation	
i. Negotiation	
j. Cognitive flexibility	
k. Other: please specify _____	

2. Which of the following soft skills are missing from candidates for positions in your organization? (Select maximum top five skills).

Soft Skills	Answers
a. Complex Problem Solving	
b. Critical Thinking	
c. Creativity	
d. People Management	
e. Coordinating with others	
f. Emotional intelligence	
g. Judgment and Decision Making	
h. Service orientation	
i. Negotiation	
j. Cognitive flexibility	
k. Other: please specify _____	

3. Does your experience show that despite the lack of soft skills among people taking up employment in your organization, they managed to develop these skills?

- Yes
- No

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4. Does your organization offer formal training for new employees (i.e. during the first 3 months of work) in soft skills?

- There is a formal soft skills training for all new employees
- There is a formal soft skills training for some of the new employees (based on selection process recommendations / based on the job requirements for the position)
- There is a formal soft skills training for the new employees who want to participate in such training
- There is no formal soft skills training for the new employees.

5. If you answered “yes” to the previous question indicate what skills is the training about.

Soft Skills	Answers
a. Complex Problem Solving	
b. Critical Thinking	
c. Creativity	
d. People Management	
e. Coordinating with others	
f. Emotional intelligence	
g. Judgment and Decision Making	
h. Service orientation	
i. Negotiation	
j. Cognitive flexibility	
k. Other: please specify _____	

6. If employee training is not provided, what is the reason? (Select maximum five reasons).

- training is too expensive
- due to the workload, there is no time to conduct training for employees;
- employees do not have time to attend courses (too much work)
- employees do not need training
- training is provided informally, i.e. in form of feedback / guidance / job shadowing
- employees have access to free online materials
- soft skills are the kind of competencies that an employee must have and develop on their own
- other, specify

7. How do you recognize the need or lack of training in soft skills among your employees?

- Self-assessment
- Peer assessment
- Supervisor assessment
- Waiting for employees to report their needs
- Interviews with individual employees
- Observation in their daily work
- Other, specify

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8. How does your organization perceive organization of trainings dedicated to soft skills?

- cost for the organization
- an advantage for the organization
- the organization's responsibility for the employee
- the employee's liability to the organization
- unnecessary time consumer
- there are so many free materials on the web - those who are interested will find it
- Other, specify

9. Represented entity:

- Enterprise
- Chamber of commerce
- Business Association
- Sole proprietorship
- Individual Professional (i.e. accountant, lawyers, engineer, etc. all categories that may have a practice that is not necessarily registered as a legal entity)
- Other, what?

10. Organization size⁷⁷:

Company category	Staff headcount	Turnover	Balance sheet total	Answer
Micro	< 10	≤ € 2 m	≤ € 2 m	
Small	< 50	≤ € 10 m	≤ € 10 m	
Medium-sized	< 250	≤ € 50 m	≤ € 43 m	
Large	Above 250	Above € 50 m	Above € 43 m	

11. Economic sector represented:

- Agriculture, forestry, hunting and fishing
- Mining and quarrying
- Manufacturing
- Generation and supply of electricity, gas, water steam, hot water and air for air-conditioning systems
- Water delivery; sewage, waste management and reclamation activities
- Construction
- Wholesale and retail trade; motor vehicle repair, including motorcycles
- Transport and storage management
- Activities related to accommodation and gastronomic services
- Information and communication
- Financial and insurance activities
- Activities relating to the real estate market
- Professional, scientific and technical activity
- Administrative and supporting activities
- Public administration and defense; mandatory social security
- Education
- Health care and social welfare

⁷⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/growth/smes/sme-definition_en (Accessed: 01.07.2021).

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- Activities related to culture, entertainment and recreation
- Other service activities
- Households employing workers; households producing products and services for their own
- Exterritorial organizations and teams

12. Represented country:

- Belgium
- Bulgaria
- Croatia
- Italy
- Latvia
- Poland
- Spain
- Other, specify:

13. Does the entity you represent operate only in the country in which it is based?

- Yes
- No

14. If you answered "No" to question 13, indicate the country in which the company you represent operates in:

- Belgium
- Bulgaria
- Croatia
- Italy
- Latvia
- Poland
- Spain
- Other, specify:

Thank you for participating in the survey

The project was implemented with the financial support of the European Commission. This form reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

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