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HISTORICAL STAGES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE “SOFT SKILLS” CONCEPT

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Annotation. This article critically examines the historical and conceptual evolution of “soft skills” from their early use in military and organizational training to their contemporary status as essential competencies in higher education and the global labour market. The analysis reveals that the concept has developed across multiple disciplinary traditions, resulting in persistent terminological diversity and the absence of a universally accepted definition or classification. Particular attention is given to the transition from perceiving soft skills as supplementary non-technical attributes to conceptualizing them as transferable and developable competencies that contribute to employability, adaptability, and effective social and professional performance. This historical trajectory establishes the theoretical foundation for further defining soft skills within philological education and substantiating the selection of critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity (the 4Cs) as the core competencies addressed in the present study.

Keywords: Soft skills, 4Cs, creativity, communication, collaboration, critical thinking, transferable competencies, employability, adaptability, higher education.

“SOFT SKILLS” KONSEPSIYASINING RIVOJLANISHIDAGI TARIXIY BOSQICHLAR

Annotatsiya. Ushbu maqolada “soft skills” tushunchasining harbiy va tashkiliy tayyorgarlik sohalaridagi dastlabki qo‘llanilishidan boshlab, oliy ta‘lim hamda global mehnat bozorida muhim kompetensiyalar sifatida e‘tirof etilishigacha bo‘lgan tarixiy va konseptual evolyutsiyasi tanqidiy tahlil qilinadi. Tahlil natijalari mazkur tushuncha turli fan va ilmiy yo‘nalishlar doirasida rivojlanganligini, bu esa terminologik xilma-xillikning saqlanib qolishiga hamda uning umume‘tirof etilgan yagona ta‘rifi va tasnifi mavjud emasligiga olib kelganligini ko‘rsatadi. “Soft skills”ni qo‘shimcha, texnik bo‘lmagan xususiyatlar sifatida talqin qilishdan ularni ishga joylashish imkoniyati, moslashuvchanlik hamda ijtimoiy va kasbiy faoliyat samaradorligini ta‘minlovchi ko‘chiriluvchan va rivojlantirilishi mumkin bo‘lgan kompetensiyalar sifatida tushunishga o‘tish jarayoniga alohida e‘tibor qaratiladi. Ushbu tarixiy rivojlanish filologik ta‘lim doirasida “soft skills” tushunchasini yanada aniq belgilash uchun nazariy asos yaratadi hamda mazkur tadqiqotda tanqidiy fikrlash,

kommunikatsiya, hamkorlik va kreativlikni (4Cs) asosiy kompetensiyalar sifatida tanlashni asoslaydi.

Kalit so‘zlar: Soft skills, 4C kompetensiyalari, kreativlik, kommunikatsiya, hamkorlik, tanqidiy fikrlash, ko‘chiriluvchan kompetensiyalar, ishga joylashish imkoniyati, moslashuvchanlik, oliy ta’lim.

ИСТОРИЧЕСКИЕ ЭТАПЫ РАЗВИТИЯ КОНЦЕПЦИИ «SOFT SKILLS»

Аннотация. В статье критически рассматривается историческая и концептуальная эволюция понятия «soft skills» — от его первоначального использования в сфере военной и организационной подготовки до современного понимания данных навыков как важнейших компетенций в высшем образовании и на глобальном рынке труда. Проведённый анализ показывает, что данное понятие формировалось в рамках различных дисциплинарных направлений, что обусловило сохраняющееся терминологическое разнообразие и отсутствие общепринятого универсального определения и классификации. Особое внимание уделяется переходу от понимания «soft skills» как дополнительных нетехнических качеств к их интерпретации как переносимых и развиваемых компетенций, способствующих трудоустройству, адаптивности, а также эффективной социальной и профессиональной деятельности. Рассмотренная историческая траектория создаёт теоретическую основу для дальнейшего уточнения понятия «soft skills» в контексте филологического образования и обосновывает выбор критического мышления, коммуникации, сотрудничества и креативности (4Cs) в качестве ключевых компетенций, рассматриваемых в настоящем исследовании.

Ключевые слова: Soft skills, компетенции 4C, креативность, коммуникация, сотрудничество, критическое мышление, переносимые компетенции, трудоустройство, адаптивность, высшее образование.

Introduction. The term *soft skills* has achieved remarkable prominence in contemporary academic, corporate, and policy discourse, yet its precise origins, definitional boundaries, and theoretical underpinnings remain the subject of ongoing scholarly debate. A critical engagement with the literature reveals that the concept did not emerge from a single, coherent theoretical tradition but rather evolved incrementally across multiple disciplinary contexts military training, industrial psychology, organizational management, and, ultimately, educational research before arriving at its current, if still contested, status as a cornerstone of twenty-first-century human capital theory. Tracing this genealogy is essential not merely for historical completeness but because the conceptual ambiguities that characterize the term's contemporary usage are directly inherited from the circumstances and intentions of its earliest formulations.

Results. The most widely cited account of the phrase's earliest institutional use locates it within the context of the United States military, specifically in training doctrine developed during the late 1960s and early 1970s. As Thornhill-Miller et al. (2023) note, the term “soft skills” emerged approximately forty years ago within frameworks designed to address the

increasingly complex demands of modern organizational environments, which the U.S. Army War College later characterized as “VUCA” volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (Barber, 1992, as cited in Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023, p. 2). In this foundational military-industrial context, the term served a primarily contrastive and organizational function: it demarcated a category of person-centred, interpersonally oriented competencies from the quantifiable, technically verifiable "hard skills" that had traditionally defined professional qualification. The epistemological logic underpinning this binary was straightforward. Hard skills those measurable through standardized performance on tasks requiring technical knowledge could be objectively assessed, certificated, and directly mapped onto job requirements. Soft skills, by contrast, were understood to resist such direct measurement, encompassing instead the dispositional, relational, and communicative capacities that enabled effective functioning within organized social and professional structures.

This early contrastive framing, while functionally pragmatic, introduced a taxonomic ambiguity that has persisted throughout the concept’s subsequent evolution. As Matteson, Anderson, and Boyden (2016) observe in their seminal literature review, the phrase “soft skills is catchy but ambiguous, and authors use it extensively with little agreement on meaning” (p. 75). The authors demonstrate that no formally agreed upon, universal set of soft skills exists across the literature and that definitions vary substantially across disciplinary contexts from business education and management studies to communication theory and library and information science. This diagnostic observation is corroborated by Cinque (2016), who identifies the absence of “a common language” as a fundamental structural problem, noting that “there are different ways of naming “soft skills” sometimes called even 'competences', different definitions of them, different ways of classifying and clustering them” (Cinque, as cited in Cinque, 2017, p. 85). The proliferation of terminology, far from being a superficial terminological inconvenience, reflects substantive disagreements about the ontological status of the capacities in question whether they are skills in the technical sense, personality traits, dispositions, attitudes, or some irreducible combination thereof.

Historically, the concept’s migration from military and corporate settings into mainstream educational discourse was mediated by the parallel development of human capital theory and labour market research, particularly from the 1970s through the 1990s. The shift from an industrial economy to an information and knowledge-based economy provided the principal socioeconomic catalyst. As Robles (2012) documents, the “shift from an industrial economy to an information society and an office economy means that many jobs now place an emphasis on integrity, communication, and flexibility” (p. 453). In this transformed economic context, soft skills moved from being peripheral attributes the kind of qualities one either possessed or did not to being strategically central determinants of individual employability and organizational performance. Schulz (2008) situates this transition within the broader history of educational philosophy, invoking C. P. Snow’s celebrated 1959 distinction between the “two cultures” of humanistic and scientific education as a structural backdrop against which the demand for soft skills in technically oriented curricula must be understood. Snow’s analysis, Schulz (2008) argues, illuminates why graduates of the sciences and engineering have historically been most deficient in soft skills disciplines that, by their very nature,

emphasize propositional and procedural knowledge at the expense of communicative and interpersonal formation.

The entry of soft skills into academic research as a discrete and theoretically serious object of inquiry was significantly accelerated by the work of economists and psychologists who sought to quantify the contribution of non-cognitive attributes to life outcomes. Heckman and Kautz (2012), writing in the *Journal of Labour Economics*, provided what became one of the most influential academic treatments of the subject, systematically reviewing the evidence that “soft skills predict success in life, that they produce that success, and that programs that enhance soft skills have an important place in an effective portfolio of public policies” (p. 451). Their analysis drew upon a century of personality psychology and labour economics to demonstrate that standardized achievement tests the dominant instruments of educational assessment systematically fail to capture those personal attributes, including “personality traits, goals, motivations, and preferences that are valued in the labor market, in school, and in many other domains” (Heckman & Kautz, 2012, p. 451). Crucially, Heckman and Kautz (2012) acknowledged the terminological multiplicity endemic to the field, noting that the attributes they studied “go by many names in the literature, including soft skills, personality traits, noncognitive skills, noncognitive abilities, character, and socioemotional skills” (p. 452), and that different names carry different theoretical implications regarding the stability, heritability, and malleability of these capacities.

Historical Development and Conceptual Evolution of “Soft Skills”

Historical period / stage	Main context or discipline	Key scholars / sources	Understanding of soft skills	Main contribution to the concept
Late 1960s–1970s: Early institutional emergence	U.S. military and professional training	U.S. military tradition; Barber (1992), cited in Thornhill-Miller et al. (2023)	Person-centred and interpersonal competencies contrasted with measurable technical or “hard” skills	Established the initial hard skills–soft skills distinction and recognized that effective professional performance requires more than technical competence
1970s–1990s: Labour-market and organizational development	Industrial psychology, organizational management, labour market	Robles (2012); Schulz (2008)	Communication, flexibility, integrity, interpersonal effectiveness, and other non-technical qualities	Economic transition from industrial to information- and knowledge-based work increased the importance of interpersonal and transferable competencies
1990s–2000s: Expansion into education and employability discourse	Higher education, professional education, human-capital development	Schulz (2008); later synthesized by Matteson et al. (2016) and Cinque (2016/2017)	Broad set of transferable personal, interpersonal, and professional competencies	Soft skills became increasingly associated with graduate employability and the need to complement disciplinary/technical knowledge
2000s–2010s: Conceptual diversification	Education, management, communication, information	Matteson, Anderson, & Boyden (2016); Cinque	Various overlapping concepts described as skills,	Revealed the absence of a universally accepted definition or classification and highlighted the field’s

Historical period / stage	Main context or discipline	Key scholars / sources	Understanding of soft skills	Main contribution to the concept
	science	(2016/2017)	competences, attitudes, traits, or dispositions	persistent terminological ambiguity
2010s: Empirical and interdisciplinary consolidation	Labour economics and personality psychology	Heckman & Kautz (2012)	Non-cognitive attributes including personality traits, goals, motivations, preferences, character, and socioemotional skills	Provided empirical evidence that non-cognitive/soft skills predict educational, labour-market, and broader life outcomes and may be developed through intervention
2010s–2020s: Higher-education institutionalization	Higher education and graduate employability	Succi & Canovi (2020)	Transferable competencies increasingly expected by employers alongside disciplinary expertise	Demonstrated a persistent skills gap between employer expectations and graduate preparation and strengthened arguments for systematic soft-skills development within universities
2020s: Twenty-first-century and future-of-work orientation	Global education policy, employment, human-capital development	World Economic Forum (2025)	Analytical thinking, creative thinking, resilience, flexibility, agility, collaboration and related transferable capacities	Positioned soft skills as essential for adaptability, employability, and professional resilience amid technological transformation and skill instability
Current educational direction	Discipline-specific higher education	Contemporary soft-skills research; present dissertation	Soft skills as developable and context-sensitive competencies that can be intentionally integrated into disciplinary learning	Moves the discussion from whether soft skills matter to how they can be systematically developed and taught within specific academic disciplines , including philology

Table 1

Discussion and conclusion. As Table 1 demonstrates, the evolution of soft skills is characterized not simply by an expansion of the skills included under the term, but by a broader conceptual shift in how these competencies are understood and applied. By the early twenty-first century, this convergent pressure from labour economics, organizational psychology, educational policy, and international development had elevated soft skills to a position of strategic prominence in global human capital discourse. The World Economic Forum’s *Future of Jobs Report 2025* provides perhaps the most dramatic contemporary expression of this elevation, reporting that analytical thinking remains the most sought-after core skill among employers globally, with seven in ten companies considering it essential in

2025, and that creative thinking, resilience, flexibility, and agility are expected to continue rising in importance through the 2025–2030 period (World Economic Forum, 2025). The same report notes that skill instability the proportion of existing skill sets expected to become outdated stands at 39% for the 2025–2030 period, underscoring the extent to which soft skills, precisely because of their transferability and adaptability, have come to be understood as the durable currency of professional competence in conditions of rapid technological and economic change (World Economic Forum, 2025).

In the specific context of higher education, the trajectory of soft skills discourse has been shaped by a persistent, and sometimes acrimonious, debate between employer groups and universities regarding the responsibility for graduate preparation. Succi and Canovi (2020) document how this “blame game” has persisted for over three decades, with employers consistently criticizing higher education institutions for failing to prepare graduates adequately for the labour market, while universities have argued that soft skills development lies beyond their traditional mandate of disciplinary formation. Their European survey of students and employers found that 86% of respondents indicated an increased emphasis on soft skills over the preceding five to ten years, and that companies consistently assigned higher importance to soft skills than students or graduates did (Succi & Canovi, 2020). This structural mismatch between employer expectations and graduate self-assessment points to a deeper pedagogical question: not merely *which* soft skills matter, but *how* higher education can most effectively create the conditions for their systematic development. It is within this broad historical and institutional trajectory that the present dissertation is situated seeking to contribute to the emerging body of research on discipline-specific, literature-based approaches to soft skills formation among philology students.

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