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THE DEFINITION OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' SOFT SKILLS: A MODERN CHINESE PERSPECTIVE

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This article offers an in-depth study of the soft skills landscape among university students, particularly focusing on the Chinese context. It argues that understanding soft skills development in China can offer valuable lessons for educators and

policymakers globally, as the emphasis on holistic education in China promotes both traditional values and modern educational practices. The paper presents a comprehensive comparative analysis of the European and Chinese approaches to defining soft skills among university students and lists the overarching attributes of soft skills among university students as perceived by Chinese scholars and educators. Moreover, the article reveals both converging and diverging points within the paradigms of soft skills between European and Chinese approaches and offers an understanding of how cultural and educational contexts influence the perception and development of these essential skills among university students.

In the modern era, where success seems to be defined not only by academic achievement but also by adaptability and interpersonal competence, the significance of soft skills cannot be overstated. Soft skills, encompassing attributes like communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and emotional intelligence, play a crucial role in shaping an

individual's personal and professional journey [1, p. 9].

Moreover, the rapid pace of economic development and globalization has created a demand for graduates with not only technical expertise but also the ability to communicate effectively, collaborate across cultures, and adapt to diverse environments. Among

the diverse demographic of university students, the cultivation of these skills represents a cornerstone in their holistic development [4, p. 21].

Among the diverse array of university contexts, the Chinese experience offers unique insights into the dynamics of soft skills acquisition and its implications for students' holistic growth. Soft skills, encompassing communication, collaboration, problem-solving, and emotional intelligence, are increasingly recognized as essential for navigating the complexities of both professional and personal spheres [6, p. 10].

This article embarks on an exploration of the soft skills landscape among university students, with a focus on the Chinese context. The authors argue that understanding the Chinese experience in soft skills development can offer valuable lessons and best practices for educators and policymakers worldwide since in China, the emphasis on holistic education extends beyond academic excellence catering to promote both traditional values and modern educational practices to shape students' soft skills development.

Furthermore, the importance of soft skills in the Chinese job market cannot be overstated. As China transitions towards a knowledge-based economy, employers increasingly prioritize candidates with strong interpersonal abilities, innovative thinking, and cross-cultural competence. Thus, the cultivation of soft skills within the Chinese university setting becomes not only a means of personal enrichment but also a pathway to professional success [12].

Defining soft skills presents a challenge due to their contextual variability. For example, multiple definitions exist, and soft skills are frequently conflated with terms like 'competence', 'competency' and 'competencies' or referred to as 'social skills,' 'people skills,' and 'interpersonal skills' [19, p. 5]. This interchangeability adds complexity to understanding and categorizing these skills effectively.

Moreover, what might be classified as a soft skill in one domain could be deemed a hard skill in another. Furthermore, there

exists a broad spectrum of perspectives regarding which abilities should be acknowledged as soft skills, further complicating the matter. According to S. Marin-Zapata et al., the phenomenon of soft skills suffers from theoretical dispersion. Researchers conclude that improvements must be made to help develop an understanding of the essence of soft skills [11].

Soft skills, as defined by prominent organizations such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), the European Commission, and the World Economic Forum, encompass a wide array of competencies crucial for success in the modern workforce. According to AACSB soft skills encompass communication, teamwork, leadership, adaptability, an international perspective, ethical values, etc. European Commission reports emphasized communication, teamwork, problem-solving, learning skills, cross-cultural skills, and organizational awareness constitute soft skills [1]. The soft skills outlined in the World Economic Forum report of 2018 include complex information processing, interpersonal communication, cooperation, leadership, emotional intelligence, critical thinking, and innovation [21].

F. Emanuel et al. assert that soft skills, also known as transversal competencies, are inherently person-centric rather than task-specific, as they hold relevance across various contexts. These skills facilitate the adoption of specific professional behaviours and are essential for transferring skills effectively to different activities [8].

E. Mitsea et al. emphasise the relationship between soft skills and metacognition. Scholars prove that soft skills have a rich cognitive background, led by attention, working memory and other executive functions, and thus are entirely dependent on the development of metacognitive skills. Among the core soft skills, the researchers mention self-awareness, self-observation, self-regulation, adaptability and flexibility in various domains (cognitive, emotional, and behavioural), recognition, and mindfulness. The latest is considered by the researchers an umbrella term that

encompasses all metacognitive abilities and makes a personality fully inclusive [16].

O. Chekhratova emphasizes autonomy as a vital soft skill, underscoring its importance in personal and professional development since in a professional setting, it allows employees to effectively manage their workload, solve problems creatively, and adapt to changing circumstances [3].

Many scholars argue that at the tertiary level, students display a particular awareness of soft skills and their significance for future career prospects. This awareness should serve as intrinsic motivation for students to actively cultivate their soft skills within the university curriculum as soft skills transcend specific tasks or disciplines and are crucial for fostering effective relationships with colleagues and collaborators in any professional setting [16; 17; 19].

The purpose of the article is to examine the understanding of university students' soft skills in the People's Republic of China within the contemporary context. The article seeks to explore how soft skills are perceived, defined, and valued by Chinese universities, considering cultural, societal, and educational influences. By providing insights into the specific nuances of soft skill development from a Chinese perspective, the article aims to contribute to the broader discourse on education, workforce readiness, and cross-cultural competency.

European paradigm of soft skills perceptions is reflected in the Education for All Global Monitoring Report UNESCO (2012) [9]. According to this paradigm, soft skills are fundamental abilities necessary for individuals to achieve sustainable development throughout their lives. These skills also referred to as transversal or horizontal skills, are broad and multidimensional, not tied to any specific field but rather applicable across various domains. They encompass knowledge, competencies, and attitudes crucial for personal and societal advancement.

The contents of soft skills, as outlined by the UNESCO report, include:

- Critical and innovative thinking: This involves fostering creativity, entrepreneurial mindset, and rational decision-making abilities.

- Interpersonal skills: These encompass organizational skills, teamwork capabilities, and empathy towards others.

- Self-reflective skills: This category involves developing self-awareness regarding one's emotions, responses to pressure, goals, and disappointments.

- Media and information literacy: Individuals are encouraged to critically evaluate media information, form independent judgments, and reinterpretations, and effectively utilize media and information technology for creation and dissemination.

- Global citizenship literacy: This skill set entails having a global perspective, understanding and tolerance of diverse cultures, embracing one's identity as a global citizen, and promoting cross-cultural understanding.

- Other skills: Additional skills include maintaining an optimistic outlook on modern lifestyles and societal changes.

In Erasmus+ reports, soft skills are described as a set of non-technical competencies and knowledge essential for successful engagement in the workplace. These skills are not specific to any particular job but are closely linked to personal attributes, social interactions, and management abilities. Personal attributes such as confidence, discipline, and self-management are key, alongside social skills like communication, teamwork, and emotional intelligence. Additionally, management abilities such as timekeeping, problem-solving, and critical thinking are emphasized as integral components of soft skills [7, p. 10].

China's government has demonstrated a significant commitment to the development of soft skills in higher education, as evidenced by various policy documents and initiatives. National Outline for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020) emphasises the importance of strengthening students' practical abilities, innovative capabilities, employability, and

entrepreneurial skills. It specifically includes the cultivation of soft skills as part of its broader educational goals [12].

The initiative to implement the 2.0 Version of the Excellent Engineer Education and Training Program (2014) highlights the need to integrate general education with professional education, aiming to enhance students' humanistic, scientific, and engineering literacy. This integration reflects a focus on developing soft skills alongside technical competencies [13].

The initiative to deepen the Reform of Innovation and Entrepreneurship Education in Colleges and Universities (2015) actively supports innovation and entrepreneurship education, urging universities to reform in this area. This initiative underscores the importance of cultivating students' innovative thinking, entrepreneurial spirit, and other soft skills crucial for success in these domains [10].

The initiative to improve Career Development and Employment Guidance for College Students (2016) states that universities are directed to enhance the construction of career development and employment guidance courses, with a focus on developing students' professional qualities, ethics, and abilities. This includes attention to soft skills necessary for successful career development [14].

Opinions on Strengthening and Improving the Comprehensive Quality Evaluation of Senior High School Students (2017) as a government policy emphasizes the evaluation of students' all-round development, including their ideological and moral character, academic performance, physical and mental health, artistic literacy, social practice, and soft skills. It underscores the importance of assessing and fostering holistic competencies among students [15].

Overall, these policy initiatives highlight the Chinese government's recognition of the critical role soft skills play in talent cultivation and the importance of integrating their development into higher education curricula and evaluation frameworks.

In the context of Chinese university education, a systematic study has revealed

various definitions of soft skills, reflecting their multifaceted nature and significance in career development. Thus, Xiong Tongcheng and Zeng Xiangquan believe that university students' soft skills encompass communication, teamwork, self-management, information processing, innovation, cross-cultural communication, and more [20]. Pan Guanglin argues that soft skills are skills other than professional ones, such as professional awareness, team spirit, communication, learning ability, and innovation [18]. Cai Xianzhong, Wang Xiuhong, and Li Yinsheng emphasize that soft skills are closely tied to personal qualities, psychological strength, communication, teamwork, and career development [2].

Chinese researchers namely Peng Zhengmei, Myungsook Lee and Aekyeong Yang categorise the notion of soft skills as a set of key 21st-century competencies. Thus, Peng Zhengmei defines university students' soft skills as a core 21st-century competency, also known as "the global common currency of the 21st century", referring to a universal ability required by individuals in the global knowledge society of the 21st century. The author admits that this ability helps students achieve individual life success in the 21st-century global knowledge society and promotes social prosperity and unity [6].

According to Myungsook Lee and Aekyeong Yang, 21st-century skills refer to a series of knowledge, skills and qualities that university students need to master in the knowledge economy society of the 21st century to adapt to social development and changes. The scholars argue that 21st-century skills include the following ten aspects: creativity and innovation; critical thinking and problem-solving; communication and collaboration; information and media literacy; ICT literacy; life and career skills; self-direction; social and cross-cultural skills; team productivity; leadership and responsibility [22].

Thus, the study shows that many Chinese researchers and educators argue that 21st-century skills refer to the new requirements for talent training put forward by the development of society, economy and science

and technology in the 21st century. These skills include critical thinking and problem-solving skills; creativity and innovation skills; collaboration, teamwork and leadership; cross-cultural understanding; information communication skills; the ability to skillfully use communication technology; career planning and self-study abilities, etc. According to them, these skills may include:

- Learning and innovation abilities: critical thinking and problem-solving abilities; creativity and innovation abilities.

- Information skills: information literacy, media literacy and ICT literacy.

- Career and life skills: flexibility and adaptability, initiative and self-direction, social and cross-cultural interaction skills (ability to respect cultural differences, respond openly to various perspectives, interact and collaborate effectively with others);

- Output ability and accountability (ability to manage projects efficiently, collaborate effectively, complete expected results, and be responsible for results);

- Leadership and responsibility (ability to use interpersonal and problem-solving skills to lead others to achieve goals, and be responsible for the interests of others and society).

Despite the variations in definitions offered by Chinese scholars and educators, they all underscore the importance of university students' soft skills in career development and interpersonal communication. These skills, which encompass personal qualities, communication, teamwork, innovation, and adaptability, are essential for individual success in the workplace.

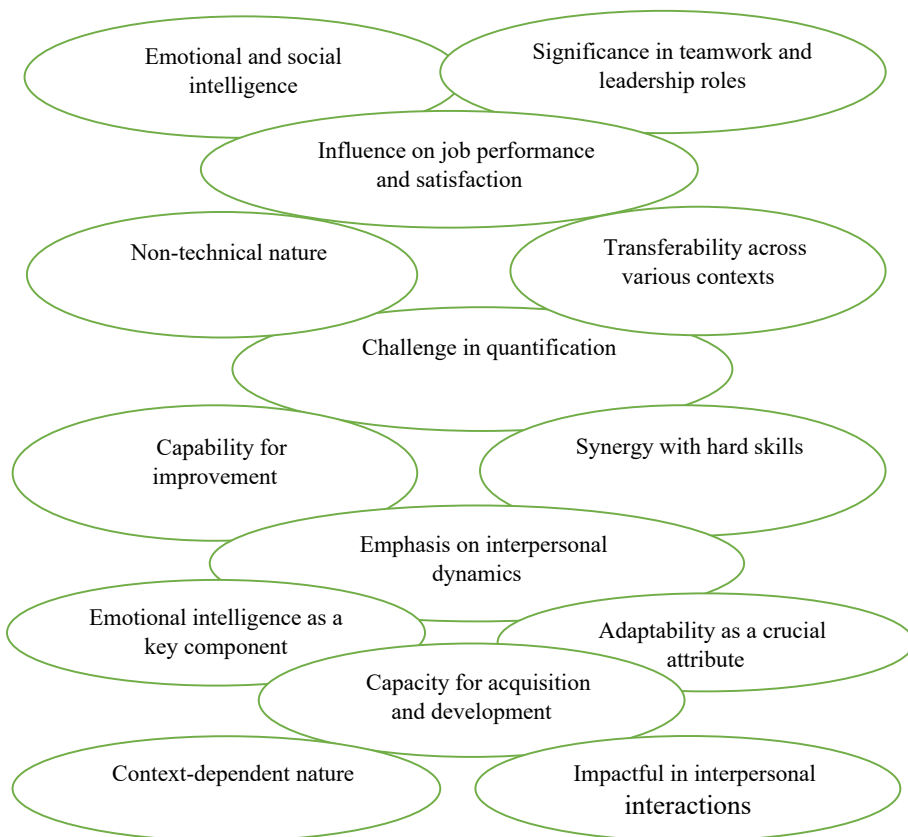
Therefore, we conducted a comprehensive comparative analysis of the European and Chinese approaches to defining soft skills among university students. Through rigorous examination and comparison, we have generated some findings regarding the differing perspectives and implications of these two distinct educational frameworks. Therefore, the Chinese soft skills paradigm identifies several key characteristics that define soft skills among university students, with particular emphasis on emotional and

social intelligence, the importance of teamwork and leadership, and their significant impact on both job performance and overall satisfaction. Picture 1 presents the overarching attributes of soft skills among university students as perceived by Chinese scholars and educators:

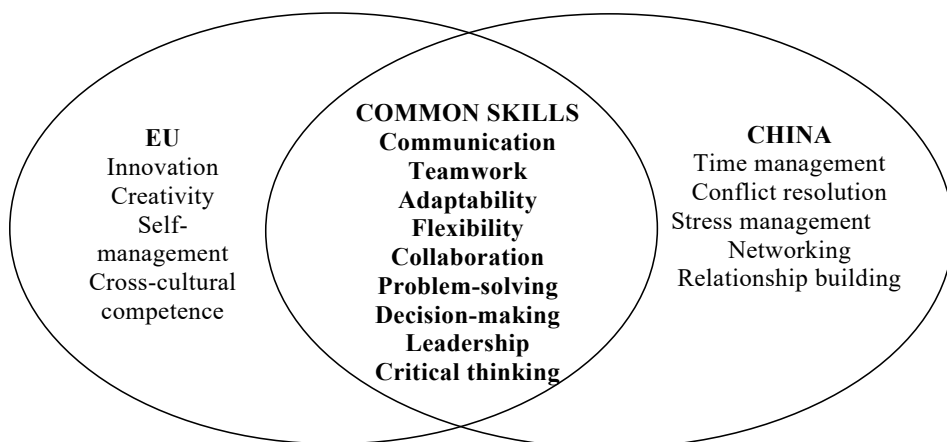
In examining the perceptions of soft skills among university students, we see it imperative to consider the contrasting perspectives of both the European and Chinese educational systems. While the European paradigm emphasizes certain characteristics and values in defining soft skills, the Chinese approach highlights somehow different attributes and priorities. By delving into these distinct viewpoints, we can gain valuable insights into how cultural and educational contexts shape the understanding and cultivation of soft skills among students in these regions. Picture 2 reveals both converging and diverging points within the paradigms of soft skills between European and Chinese approaches to the definition of soft skills offering a nuanced understanding of how cultural and educational contexts influence the perception and development of these essential skills among university students.

University students' soft skills are indispensable for individuals seeking to navigate the complexities of contemporary society and contribute to sustainable development efforts. They equip individuals with the capacity to adapt, innovate, collaborate, and engage meaningfully in an ever-evolving global landscape.

The Chinese experience offers valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of soft skills development among university students. By exploring the cultural nuances, educational practices, and socio-economic factors shaping this landscape, we can obtain valuable lessons and best practices applicable to diverse educational contexts worldwide. Ultimately, understanding the Chinese experience in soft skills development enriches our understanding of student growth and underscores the importance of fostering holistic competencies in higher education.



Pic. 1. Attributes of soft skills among university students as perceived by Chinese scholars and educators



Pic. 2. Converging and diverging points within the paradigms of soft skills between European and Chinese approaches

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Тетяна ПОГОРЄЛОВА, Занг ЛЕЙ

Визначення гнучких навичок студентів університету: сучасна китайська парадигма

Ця стаття пропонує дослідження питання формування гнучких навичок серед студентів університету, особливо зосереджуючись на китайському контексті. У статті стверджується, що розуміння розвитку гнучких навичок у Китаї може запропонувати цінну інформацію для освітян і політиків у всьому світі, оскільки акцент на цілісній освіті в Китаї сприяє як традиційним цінностям, так і сучасним освітнім практикам. Стаття представляє всебічний порівняльний аналіз європейських і китайських підходів до визначення гнучких навичок

серед студентів університетів і перераховує основні їхні характеристики серед студентів університетів, як їх сприймають китайські вчені та педагоги. Крім того, стаття розкриває точки зближення та розбіжності щодо визначення цього поняття між європейським та китайським підходами та пропонує розуміння того, як культурний та освітній контексти впливають на сприйняття та розвиток гнучких навичок серед студентів університету.

Ключові слова: гнучкі навички, студенти університету, китайська освітня парадигма, компетентності 21 століття.