

Students' Perception of the Development of Transversal Competencies in Higher Education

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Abstract

In the context of a globalized and technology-driven labor market, transversal competencies have become increasingly vital for employability and long-term career success. Unlike technical (hard) skills, which are specific to particular jobs or professions, transversal competencies—such as communication, teamwork, adaptability, and critical thinking—are transferable across various domains and industries. This study explores university students' perceptions regarding the development of transversal (soft) skills throughout their academic journey. Employing a quantitative research design, data were collected via an online questionnaire completed by 52 students enrolled in diverse academic programs and faculties at the National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA of Bucharest. The findings reveal that most students perceive a moderate to high level of transversal skill development, primarily facilitated through instructional activities (lectures, seminars, laboratories) and group projects. The study concludes with recommendations aimed at enhancing the role of universities in fostering transversal competencies, including curriculum redesign, increased emphasis on experiential learning, and the integration of transversal skill training across all levels of higher education.

Keywords: Transversal competencies, soft skills, employability, higher education.

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1. Introduction

In today's globalized and highly technologized socio-economic context, specialized knowledge and professional competencies that once guaranteed employment are no longer sufficient. Consequently, throughout their university studies, students must also acquire a range of transversal competencies—soft skills—that are essential for competitiveness and professional integration.

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), transversal competencies are considered key skills¹ or "competencies for social progress"². The European Commission defines them as the ability to work on and transfer skills across different domains while the European Union refers to them as essential competencies for lifelong learning or transversal skills³.

Transversal competencies encompass personal and interpersonal abilities, as well as character traits that enable individuals to adapt effectively to professional environments and collaborate harmoniously with others. These include problem-solving, teamwork, communication, flexibility, emotional intelligence, and other non-technical skills.

Unlike hard skills—technical abilities specific to a job that enable the execution of particular tasks—soft skills are transferable abilities such as communication, teamwork, adaptability, and emotional intelligence. Transversal competencies are not intended to replace technical skills but rather to complement them⁴.

The Council of Europe⁵ considers the development of soft skills essential for supporting graduates' integration into the labor market. Similarly, the European Higher Education Area emphasizes the need to include the training and development of soft skills—general essential competencies—in every study program, in order to diversify technical abilities.

¹ OECD, *Definitions and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations (DeSeCo)* (2001), <https://www.deseco.ch/bfs/deseco/en/index/01.parsys.70925.downloadList.59988.DownloadFile.tmp/2001annualreport.pdf>

² OECD, *Skills for Social Progress: The Power of Social and Emotional Skills*, OECD Skills Studies (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264226159-en>.

³ European Union, *Transferability of Skills across Economic Sectors* (2011): Annexes, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/40404>.

⁴ Orkun Yildiz and Tugba Elif Toprak-Yildiz, "The Construction of Soft Skills Scale Targeted Generation Z For IT Sector," in *38th Bled EConference: Empowering Transformation: Shaping Digital Futures for All: Conference Proceedings*, ed. Andreja Pucihar, Mirjana Kljajić Borštnar, Staša Blatnik, Marjeta Marolt, Roger W. H. Bons, Koen Smit, and Matthias Glowatz, 305–18 (Blejska E-Konferenca: Univerzitetna založba Univerze v Mariboru, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.18690/um.fov.4.2025.19>

⁵ Council of Europe, Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (2018), [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604(01))

In a globalized society where workplaces are increasingly multicultural and virtually dispersed⁶, creativity, social and emotional skills, communication, and critical thinking are highly valued^{7 8}.

There is a strong correlation between soft skills and employability, as these competencies influence how individuals interact, communicate, and adapt to the work environment. Employability and career readiness are complex concepts that are difficult to define, quantify, or implement in practice.

Employers increasingly value candidates with well-developed soft skills, as these contribute to workplace productivity, team cohesion, and the ability to generate effective solutions. In many cases, companies regard these competencies as equally important—if not more so—than technical skills.

Defined as personal attributes that enhance workplace interactions, soft skills are not tied to specific tasks but are essential for organizational integration and have a significant impact on professional performance. Numerous studies emphasize the growing demand for these competencies in the labor market, highlighting their role as a critical factor for employability and career success^{9 10 11 12}.

A significant gap has been identified between labor market expectations and the educational system in terms of soft skills development. Several researchers^{13 14} advocate for the "skillification" of university curricula to ensure the integration of soft skills into academic

⁶ Marcela Castro, André Barcaui, Bouchaib Bahli, și Ronnie Figueiredo, "Do the Project Manager's Soft Skills Matter? Impacts of the Project Manager's Emotional Intelligence, Trustworthiness, and Job Satisfaction on Project Success," *Administrative Sciences* 12, no. 4 (2022): 141, <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci12040141>

⁷ K. A. Alshare, P. L. Lane, și D. Miller, "Business Communication Skills in Information Systems (IS) Curricula: Perspectives of IS Educators and Students," *Journal of Education for Business* 86, nr. 3 (2011): 186–194, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08832323.2010.497819>

⁸ M. P. Batista și M. Romani-Dias, "AACSB International Accreditation as a Catalyst for Soft Skills in Business Schools," *Journal of Education for Business* 97, nr. 4 (2022): 213–219, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08832323.2021.1924105>

⁹ I. Albandea și J. Giret, "The Effect of Soft Skills on French Post-Secondary Graduates' Earnings," *International Journal of Manpower* 39, nr. 6 (2018): 782–799, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJM-01-2017-0014>

¹⁰ M. B. Cuesta și S. Budría, "Unemployment Persistence: How Important Are Non-Cognitive Skills?" *Journal of Behavioral and Experimental Economics* 69 (2017): 29–37, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soccec.2017.05.006>

¹¹ H. Ito și N. Kawazoe, „Active Learning for Creating Innovators: Employability Skills Beyond Industrial Needs,” *International Journal of Higher Education* 4, nr. 2 (2015): 81–91, <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v4n2p81>

¹² David J. Deming, „The Growing Importance of Social Skills in the Labor Market,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 132, nr. 4 (noiembrie 2017): 1593–1640, <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjx022>

¹³ C. Villegas, „A Systematic Review of Research on Soft Skills for Employability,” *Advanced Education* 25 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.20535/2410-8286.314064>

¹⁴ W. Teng, C. Ma, S. Pahlevansharif, și J. J. Turner, „Graduate Readiness for the Employment Market of the 4th Industrial Revolution: The Development of Soft Employability Skills,” *Education + Training* 61, nr. 5 (2019): 590–604, <https://doi.org/10.1108/ET-07-2018-0154>

programs. The lack of such competencies among graduates has been noted by employers as a barrier to successful employment.

Despite the competency-based focus of higher education, studies show that the skills most often lacking among recent graduates are not technical but rather soft skills such as leadership, problem-solving, and time management¹⁵. Other research indicates that universities often fail to adequately prepare students for the workforce^{16, 17}.

Crespí¹⁸ argues that the development of personal competencies complements academic education and constitutes a fundamental component of a well-rounded education, enabling individuals to excel in any professional domain. These competencies—commonly referred to as generic, transversal, or soft skills—can be categorized into three types: cognitive (related to human thinking capacity), intrapersonal (related to self-awareness), and interpersonal (related to interaction with others). Their development can be supported through the inclusion of dedicated soft skills courses in the curriculum, participation in extracurricular activities, the integration of innovative teaching methods, and coaching or mentoring programs¹⁹.

Therefore, in order to enhance their career prospects, students must acquire soft skills during their university studies to secure employment upon graduation²⁰. A growing body of literature supports the integration of these competencies into university curricula. The development of soft skills has become an increasingly pressing concern, as many academic programs either do not include or fail to provide adequate training for these essential competencies²¹.

¹⁵ S. Andreas, „Effects of the Decline in Social Capital on College Graduates' Soft Skills,” *Industry and Higher Education* 32, nr. 1 (2018): 47–56, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950422217749277>

¹⁶ Álvaro Antón-Sancho, Diego Vergara, și Pablo Fernández-Arias, „Self-Assessment of Soft Skills of University Teachers from Countries with a Low Level of Digital Competence,” *Electronics* 10, nr. 20 (2021): 2532, <https://doi.org/10.3390/electronics10202532>

¹⁷ Mikhail V. Gruzdev, Irina V. Kuznetsova, Irina Yu. Tarkhanova, și Elena I. Kazakova, „University graduates' soft skills: The employers' opinion,” *European Journal of Contemporary Education* 7, nr. 4 (2018): 690–698.

¹⁸ P. Crespí, „Perception and evaluation of a subject on transversal personal competences,” în *Investigación para la mejora de las prácticas educativas desde una perspectiva holística*, ed. B. Berral Ortiz, J. A. Martínez Domingo, C. R. Fernández Fernández, și J. J. Victoria Maldonado (Madrid: Dykinson, 2024), 1237–1247.

¹⁹ P. Crespí, J. L. Gonzalez, J. R. Barroso și R. Virues, „Effectiveness of soft skills curricular subjects: a case study of two universities, Spain and Mexico,” *Journal of New Approaches in Educational Research* 14, nr. 15 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44322-025-00035-y>

²⁰ Afifa Ibrahim și Ajaz A. Mistree, „Preparing graduates for the world of competition: A normative role of higher education,” *International Journal of Academic Research and Development* 2, nr. 5 (2017): 371–374, <https://allstudiesjournal.com/assets/archives/2017/vol2issue5/2-5-65-246.pdf>

²¹ Fernando Vera și Eneko Tejada, „Developing Soft Skills in Undergraduate Students: A Case at a Chilean Private University,” *Transformar* 1, nr. 1 (2020): 57–67, <https://revistatransformar.cl/index.php/transformar/article/view/12>

2. Methodology

2.1. Objective

The aim of this study is to investigate the perceptions of students at the National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA of Bucharest regarding the ways in which they acquire transversal competencies throughout their university education. The research seeks to highlight the extent to which the academic environment contributes to the development of these competencies and to identify the main sources through which they are cultivated.

For the purpose of this research, the following research objectives were formulated:

1. To identify the transversal competencies that students consider important.
2. To assess students' perceptions regarding the extent to which these competencies are developed within their academic programs.
3. To identify the academic or extracurricular activities that contribute to the development of transversal competencies.

The starting hypotheses of this research are:

- Students perceive that the university significantly contributes to the development of transversal competencies (e.g., communication, critical thinking, teamwork).
- There is a positive correlation between involvement in extracurricular activities and students' perceptions of transversal skill development.
- Students who frequently participate in group projects or oral presentations perceive greater development in communication and teamwork skills.

Based on the aim and objectives of the study, the following research questions have been formulated:

1. To what extent do students perceive that they acquire transversal competencies during their university studies?
2. Which academic and extracurricular activities are perceived by students as the most effective in fostering the development of transversal competencies?

2.2. Participants

Participants in this quantitative study are 52 students enrolled in undergraduate and master's degree programs at the university. The sample includes an equal number of male and female students, with 90% enrolled in bachelor's programs and 10% in master's programs.

2.3. Instrument

The research conducted in this study is quantitative and descriptive in nature. The chosen research method was the questionnaire-based survey. For this purpose, a questionnaire consisting of 19 items was developed: 18 closed-ended items, formulated as statements or questions with predefined response options (e.g., a 5-point Likert scale, single or multiple-choice grids), and 1 open-ended item, which allowed respondents to freely

express their opinion regarding the transversal competency they believe should be further developed.

2.4. Procedure

The questionnaire was administered online using the Google Forms platform, and participation was both voluntary and anonymous. The collected data were processed and analyzed using Microsoft Excel and statistically interpreted through the Chi-square test of independence and Cramér's V coefficient.

This study is empirical in nature and constitutes a micro-level investigation. Consequently, the results cannot be generalized to the broader student population.

2.5. Limitations of the Study

The research presents several limitations that may influence the validity and interpretation of the results. Firstly, the study was conducted on a relatively small sample of 52 students, selected through a convenience sampling method, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to the broader university population. Secondly, the data were collected through self-assessment, relying on students' subjective perceptions rather than objective measurements of transversal competencies. This approach may introduce response bias, such as the tendency to provide socially desirable answers. Additionally, although participants were drawn from multiple faculties, the distribution across academic specializations was not balanced, potentially affecting the comparability of responses. The use of a questionnaire, while efficient for data collection, may have limited the depth and nuance of the responses, particularly in the case of closed-ended items. These limitations should be taken into account when interpreting the results and drawing conclusions from the study.

3. Results and discussions

The questionnaire items addressed the following aspects:

- The level of confidence in securing employment within the field of specialization.
- The perceived usefulness of acquired competencies in other professional domains.
- The development of transversal (soft) skills through various activities (e.g., coursework, volunteering, internships, etc.).
- Self-assessment of competencies such as effective communication, teamwork, adaptability, and critical thinking.
- The perceived importance of transversal competencies in the labor market and in professional practice.
- Suggestions regarding the competencies that should be further developed.

In the initial stage of the analysis, a statistical examination was conducted using the Chi-square test of independence and Cramér's V coefficient in order to explore the association between responses to two questionnaire items:

1. Students' perception of their employability within their field of specialization.
2. Students' perception of the transferability of competencies acquired during university studies.

The results indicate that students who believe they are "to a great extent" or "to a very great extent" likely to find employment in their field of specialization also tend to report that the competencies acquired during their studies are useful in other professional domains. A positive association was found between perceived employability in the field of study and the perceived transferability of competencies ($p = 0.013$). To measure the strength of this association between the two categorical variables, Cramér's V coefficient was calculated, yielding a value of Cramér's V = 0.36, which indicates a moderate association.

This analysis supports the idea that students who are confident in their future employment prospects within their specialization also tend to view the competencies they have acquired as broadly applicable across different fields.

The results of the survey indicate that a significant proportion of students—approximately 62%—believe they have developed transversal competencies (soft skills) to a great or very great extent during their university studies. This suggests that academic programs at the National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA of Bucharest incorporate elements conducive to the formation of soft skills, such as effective communication, teamwork, adaptability, and critical thinking.

However, a notable percentage of respondents—around 29%—reported that these competencies were developed only to a limited extent, highlighting a potential area for improvement in teaching methods and the integration of extracurricular activities aimed at fostering transversal skills.

Students perceive the development of soft skills as being influenced differently by various types of learning activities. *Traditional academic activities* such as lectures and practical applications are considered by most respondents to have a significant impact. Additionally, *debates, case studies, and group projects* are frequently mentioned as effective methods for soft skill development.

Volunteering is viewed as a beneficial activity, though responses are more evenly distributed, suggesting that personal experience and level of involvement play a role in shaping perceptions of its effectiveness. Participation in *student organizations* is seen as an opportunity for skill development, albeit with a lower perceived impact compared to volunteering or internships.

Internships are among the most highly valued activities for soft skill development, even though their primary focus tends to be the application of theoretical knowledge. *Student scientific sessions* received mixed feedback—some students found them useful for enhancing communication and critical thinking, while others did not perceive them as relevant to transversal competencies.

Regarding **communication skills**, students reported a moderate to high level of development during their university studies. To identify the most effective learning activities for developing communication skills, the scores related to communication competency were correlated with the activities mentioned by respondents (Table 1).

Table 1. The most frequently mentioned learning activities and their associated average scores for communication skill development.

Activity	Average score
Group projects	3.50
Discussions on different topics in course activities and applications	3.81
Case studies analyzed in course/laboratory activities	3.88
Different activities with peers	3.58
Problem solving	3.33
Role plays	3.44

Analytical and interactive activities, such as case studies and debates that involve group work, are clearly associated with the highest scores in terms of communication skill development. Group projects and peer collaboration are among the most frequently mentioned activities, although they are associated with slightly lower average scores. As expected, more technical or individual activities, such as problem-solving tasks, tend to receive lower average scores for communication skill development.

When asked to what extent critical thinking developed during their university studies (Figure 1), over 67% of respondents indicated that this soft skill improved significantly or very significantly, particularly as a result of classroom-based teaching activities (Figure 2).

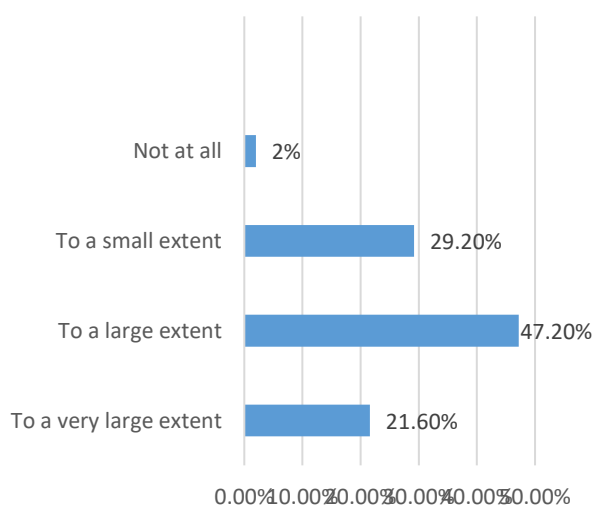


Fig.1. Development of critical thinking skills during university studies

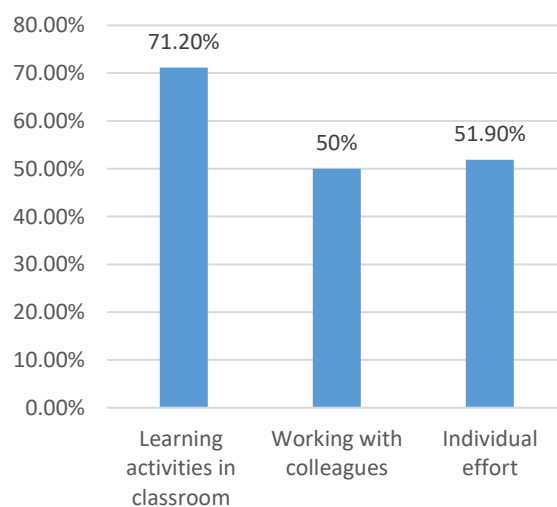


Fig.2. Activities that facilitated the development of critical thinking

Regarding **the ability to work in a team**, over 75% of respondents reported an improvement in this skill during university studies (Figure 3), suggesting a generally positive perception of collaborative experiences within the analyzed group. However, 19.2% indicated that they developed these skills only to a small extent, which may reflect the absence of effective collaboration mechanisms, interpersonal misunderstandings, or an institutional culture that does not sufficiently promote teamwork.

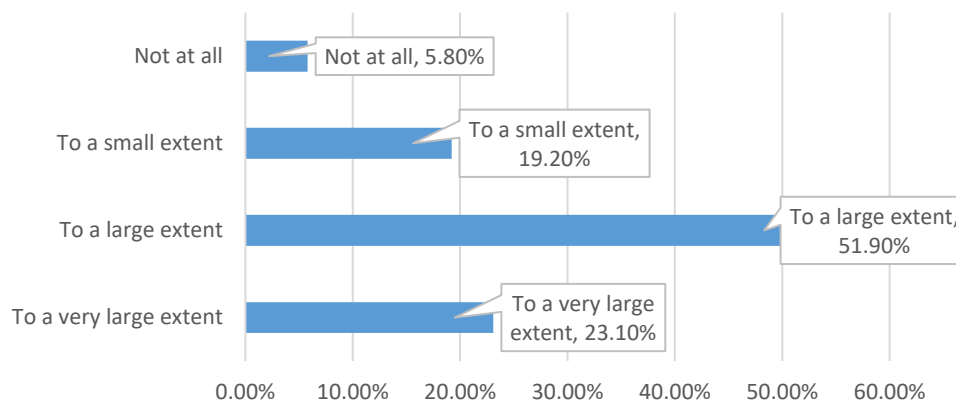


Fig. 3. Teamwork ability

Respondents were asked about the development of the following aspects during their university studies:

- The ability to engage in lifelong learning
- The ability to adapt to new situations
- The ability to act independently
- The ability to make decisions
- The ability to find employment

The ability to engage in lifelong learning received a high average score, while the ability to find employment scored slightly lower. Students perceived that they developed lifelong learning and adaptability skills the most, suggesting a solid preparation for dynamic contexts.

The lower average score for the ability to find employment may indicate a need for additional support in career guidance or in developing skills directly applicable to the labor market.

When asked in which types of courses they developed their soft skills, 75% indicated that these were developed within mandatory courses, 15.4% in optional courses, and only 9.6% in elective courses (Figure 4).

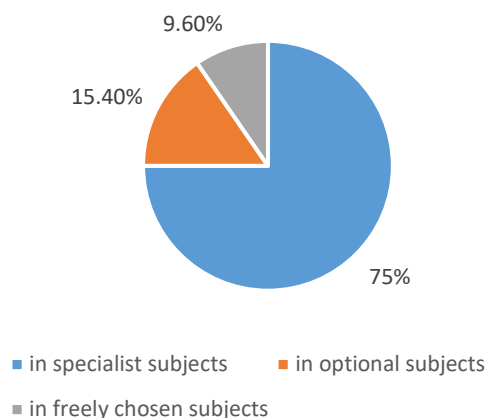


Fig.4. Courses that contributed to the development of soft skills

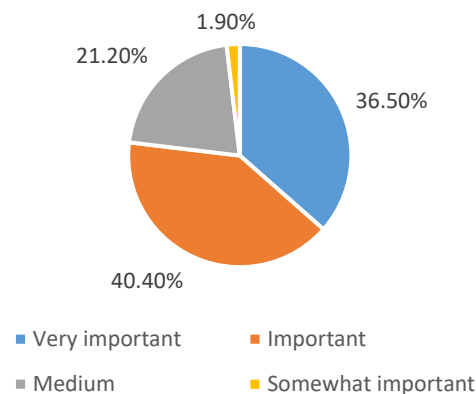


Fig. 5. The importance of transversal competencies in finding employment

A total of 76.9% of respondents consider transversal competencies to be important or very important for finding employment. The same percentage also considers them important or very important for performing effectively in a professional role (Figure 5).

When asked to self-assess their transversal competencies, over 50% rated them as good or very good, while 2% were unable to provide an assessment.

When invited to identify a transversal competency that should be further developed, the most frequently mentioned were: *communication/ teamwork/ responsibility/ time management/ creativity/ negotiation/ self-confidence/ autonomy/ adaptability/ critical thinking/ stress management/ decision making/ initiative/ leadership/ empathy*.

These reflect areas in which students feel they need improvement, despite their academic development.

Conclusions

The analysis of the responses collected through the questionnaire reveals several important trends regarding students' perceptions of transversal competence development during their university studies. The majority of respondents reported substantial growth in key areas such as teamwork, communication, critical thinking, adaptability. These competencies are considered essential not only for academic success but also for effective integration into the labor market and professional environments.

Importantly, the findings suggest that students who feel confident about their future employment prospects are also more likely to recognize the broader applicability of the skills they have developed during their studies.

This reinforces the idea that transversal competencies not only support employability within a specific domain but also enhance adaptability across diverse professional contexts. As such, universities should continue to emphasize the development of these competencies as part of a holistic educational approach.

Activities such as group projects, debates, and case studies—especially those involving peer collaboration—have proven to be particularly effective in fostering

communication, collaboration, and critical thinking, which are increasingly valued in today's dynamic work settings.

Moreover, students' self-identified areas for improvement—including time management, creativity, autonomy, and leadership—highlight the need for a more systematic and intentional integration of soft skills development within the university curriculum. When students are aware that the competencies they acquire—such as communication, teamwork, and critical thinking—are transferable beyond their immediate field, they may be more motivated to engage in learning activities that foster these abilities.

From a policy and institutional perspective, these results underscore the need for interdisciplinary and experiential learning opportunities, such as internships, project-based learning, and extracurricular involvement. These contexts not only reinforce transversal skill development but also help students build confidence in their employability across sectors.

In conclusion, transversal competencies are a cornerstone of modern higher education. As emphasized by prior research many academic programs still lack structured approaches to cultivating these essential skills. A more deliberate and integrated strategy for developing soft skills is crucial to ensuring that graduates are not only academically prepared but also equipped to thrive in an increasingly complex and competitive professional landscape.

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