Building Soft Skills for Employability

This book is among the first of its kind to comprehensively examine the implementation of soft skills in universities in the developing country, Vietnam. The context is unique as the implementation is taking place within the distinctive socio-economic, cultural and political characteristics of the country, and amidst several simultaneously-executed educational reforms.

Tran lays down the foundation for discussion by providing readers with a comprehensive review of how soft skills implementation has come into existence in higher education across the globe, before diving into the implementation of soft skills in Vietnamese universities. He goes on to highlight the interesting differences in the conceptualization of soft skills between Vietnamese universities and those in the West.

The book depicts and compares how university leaders and managers tackle contextual factors, submit to constraints enforced by political forces, and how they use institutional advantages available for implementation. It goes further to examine how personal and contextual factors affect teachers' and students' engagement with the implementation, and highlights the role of work-integrated learning and extra-curricular activities in developing soft skills for students. Finally, the book investigates the contribution of external stakeholders, such as alumni, employers, skills experts, and local authorities to the implementation, and obstacles that prevent their participation.

This book will be a valuable reference for the implementation of soft skills in higher education around the world.

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Tran Le Huu Nghia

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This book is dedicated to

**Emeritus Professor Peter McPhee
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The University of Melbourne, Australia**

**Doctor Ryan Naylor
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Thank you for your guidance in my first steps into academia.

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Introduction

Soft skills and graduate employability

Some decades ago, possessing a university credential could guarantee graduates a permanent job with which they could climb the career ladder. However, in our contemporary society, that scenario has completely changed. A university credential alone can no longer afford graduates a permanent job. This situation appears to have resulted from some key factors.

First, knowledge expansion and technological advancement have caused constant changes in skill demands in the labor market. It is estimated that knowledge doubled every century up to 1900; that time span reduced to 25 years after World War II, and nowadays, new knowledge doubles every 13 months, on average, with nanotechnology knowledge doubling every two years and clinical knowledge every 18 months (Dehkord, Samimi, Alivand, & Sani, 2017). The spread of the Internet is one of the major causes of the widespread distribution of knowledge (Schilling, 2010). Likewise, it is easy to observe that new technologies, equipment, and devices are being invented for the workplace at an unprecedented speed (Rossi, 2017; Susskind & Susskind, 2015). In such a climate, university curricula, which are usually framed within three to four academic years, cannot hope to include and impart all of the new knowledge and skills needed for the modern workplace. Even if universities could do so, graduates are unlikely to master all the knowledge and skills required for work by the time of their graduation, because their professional expertise needs time to grow within a community of practice. Unfortunately, employers want new employees to hit the ground running (Brunner, Zarkin, & Yates, 2018; McMurray, Dutton, McQuaid, & Richard, 2016; Stevens & Norman, 2016) so that they can spend less on training them (Lindorff, 2011; Tran, 2018). Consequently, only prospective employees who are able to demonstrate their capability, in addition to a university credential, can convince employers to offer them a job.

Second, the expansion of higher education (HE) has offered more learning opportunities for all who want a higher education, resulting in an increase in the number of graduates. For example, in a recent paper, Yang (2018) reported that in China the student HE enrollments increased from 936,690 in 1999 to 3,261,081 in 2009. By the end of this period, approximately 19 to 27% of graduates could not secure a job at their education level, despite a high economic growth rate in the country. In the same period, about 48% of four-year college graduates in the United States of America (USA) were not employed in jobs that

require a degree (Vedder, Denhart, & Robe, 2013). The situation is no better in the United Kingdom (UK) either, where the Office for National Statistics reports that graduate underemployment has risen from 37% in 2001 to 47% in 2013 (cited in Mok & Jiang, 2018). In 2018, the graduate unemployment rate in Spain was 15.5%, France 9.2%, and Finland 7.6% (The Statistics Portal, 2018). Although graduate unemployment could be caused by economic recession, an over-supply of graduates appears to be the main cause because all of the mentioned countries have strong and relatively stable economies.

Third, labor-market realities now are characterized by constant changes with increasing complexities and career mobility. Permanent jobs are diminishing while precarious ones are increasing (Lewchuk, 2017; Maciejewska, Mrozowicki, & Piasna, 2016). For example, in 1976, the percentage of full-time employees in Australia and Canada was 85.4% and 87.5%, respectively; by 2015 the figures had dropped to 73.7% and 81.9%, respectively (Lewchuk, 2017). In Germany, between 2000 and 2010, the number of people with full-time jobs reduced by approximately 2.55 million, whereas the number of people with part-time jobs increased by 1.83 million (Lehndorff, 2016). Such a change in work arrangement means that graduates move from job to job or from one organization to another before they land a permanent employment position, possibly when their expertise is highly appraised. During the education-to-work and work-to-work transition periods, graduates need non-technical skills that enable them to navigate the world of work, identify employment opportunities relevant to their expertise, and demonstrate their capabilities to prospective employers before they can use their technical expertise for their work.

Fourth, the change in the nature of work and how work is carried out also reduces the value of university credentials. In our modern workplace, work is becoming more complex as it involves knowledge and skills from different disciplines (Bajada & Trayler, 2013; Ivanaj & Ivanaj, 2010). It is the norm that employees need to be capable of working individually and in a team to complete projects. Work outcomes are often the combination of the expertise of all people involved rather than reliant on individual expertise. All of this means that employees need both technical and non-technical skills and/or authentic work experience, not merely a university credential, to perform the job properly.

In response to these changes, HE institutions worldwide are investing in helping their students develop skills that enhance their employment and career-development prospects, creating a so-called employability agenda in HE. Employability skills are understood as “a set of achievements—skills, understanding and personal attributes—that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy” (Yorke, 2006, p. 23). These skills help students “discern, acquire, adapt and continually enhance the skills, understandings and personal attributes that make them more likely to find and create meaningful paid and unpaid work that benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy” (Oliver, 2015, p. 56). These snapshots of employability perspectives suggest that employability is not static but evolves throughout one’s life. Therefore, graduates need to be able to adapt

to all changes they are exposed to and learn continuously at work so that they can remain employable amidst the ups and downs of the labor market.

There are several proposed frameworks of graduate employability (for example, Clarke, 2017; Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Tomlinson, 2017) that comprise several types of capital, which can be developed via learning and work experience:

- **Human capital:** Specialized knowledge and skills, soft skills and attributes as well as socio-physical features such as gender, age, race, marital status, etc.
- **Social capital:** Social relationships, memberships and associations to people or organizations.
- **Cultural capital:** Understanding of cultures or practices in different contexts.
- **Psychological capital:** Psychological qualities beneficial for career development such as resilience, flexibility, self-efficacy, adaptability.
- **Identity capital:** Formation of work identities or personal investment in employment.

Despite being classified into several components, employability capital appears to be the combination of two sets of skills: technical and non-technical. The former includes skills distinctive to a discipline—i.e., specialized skills. The technical skills of a discipline can be homogenous between institutions in a country, or even across countries. The latter can be described as transferable, non-discipline-specific skills that may be achieved through learning and can be applied in study, work, and life contexts (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2013). They are also known as soft skills, generic skills, generic graduate attributes, and transferable skills (Bowman, 2010; Maria, 2016).

Looking back to the employability capital above, soft skills are dominantly composed of these types of capital. Thus, soft skills appear to be a significant determinant of employment outcomes. They help separate employable and unemployable job applicants or distinguish capable employees, who should be invested in for the future, from those who are less capable. Indeed, an abundance of studies indicate that employers are looking for soft skills in their prospective employees. For example, Brunner et al. (2018) analyzed the content of 199 entry-level employment advertisements posted to the Public Relations Society of America Job Center to find out what employers were looking for. They concluded that employers were not only looking for technical skills but also for soft skills, such as time management, deadline orientation, and collaboration. Using the same method, plus interviews and focus groups, Stevens and Norman (2016) analyzed 543 job advertisements in New Zealand to explore what capabilities employers needed from IT graduates. They found that employers were concerned about graduates' soft skills related to their ability to work in teams, serve customers, and function well in a business environment, and that employers often make recruitment decisions based on graduates' personal qualities. Framing their study within the context of the business discipline, McMurray et al. (2016) found that when recruiting graduates, employers paid attention to their personal attitudes,

employability skills, relevant work experience, and degree results. They found that employers favored transferable skills such as trustworthiness, reliability, motivation, communication skills, and a willingness to learn.

Several studies also suggest that soft skills work to graduates' advantage when they apply for jobs, or in their career development once they are in a career. A study conducted by Stanford Research Institute and Carnegie Melon Foundation found that 75% of long-term job success depends on soft skills and only 25% on technical knowledge (Litecky, Arnett, & Prabhakar, 2004, p. 69). In another study conducted in the UK, Nickson, Warhurst, Commander, Hurrell, and Cullen (2012) surveyed 173 clothing, footwear, and leather retailers about what influenced their hiring decisions. The results showed that job applicants' personalities (79.7%) and appearance (68.2%) were much more important for their decisions than the applicants' work experience (41.1%) and qualifications (4.6%). Moving away from the contribution of soft skills to graduates' employment, Gayani Fernando, Amaratunga, and Haigh (2014) explored what contributed to women's career success. They found that although success can be affected by age and gender, it depended more on soft skills than technical skills. Shaping the study in an opposite direction, Eisner (2010) found that a lack of soft skills is the key reason for employees being fired.

Against numerous studies that support the importance of soft skills in one's career development, Groh, Krishnan, McKenzie, and Vishwanath (2016) found that training in soft skills, as part of the World Bank's Jordan NOW pilot programs, did not increase possibilities for Jordanian female youth to secure jobs. However, this training was delivered within 45 hours over a nine-day period, which is not meaningful for developing soft skills as these skills need time and practice to grow (Bowman, 2010; Gonczi, 2006). The study suggests that training students in soft skills must be conducted methodologically rather than adopting a rushed, practical approach only to help students get a job. It could also be that the soft skills training in the pilot programs was not localized enough to enable participants to meet local employers' expectations.

The literature on soft-skills training, which is mostly derived from the Western English-speaking context, shows a diversity of approaches, initiatives, and activities used to help students develop these skills, depending on institutional contexts. For example, soft skills can be imparted to students via add-on units at the beginning of a degree course, or they can be integrated into the curriculum and delivered simultaneously with technical skills (Al-Mahmood & Gruba, 2007; Barrie, Hughes, Smith, & Thomson, 2009). They can also be developed by work-integrated learning, community service, or extracurricular activities (ECAs) (Jackson, 2018; Osman, 2011; Tran, 2017a). However, research has consistently pointed out that universities have not invested enough, academics are disengaged, and students overlook developing soft skills (Barrie et al., 2009; de la Harpe & David, 2012; Jones, 2009; Tran, 2017a, 2017b). All of this means that, contrary to the increasing importance of soft skills in the labor market, the supply side (i.e., student, academic, and the university in general) has not developed these skills to meet the needs of the demand side.

In short, current labor-market realities are becoming complex and require graduates to possess more than credentials and technical knowledge and skills. Soft skills are largely found to contribute to graduates' success in securing a first job and to thrive in their careers. However, it seems that soft skills training in HE is fragmented and is often disregarded by some stakeholders. It is also suggested that the implementation of soft skills in HE depends on contextual factors. For these reasons, it is vital to examine how soft skills are developed to enhance students' employability within certain HE contexts.

The focus of this book

This book reports on how Vietnamese universities are developing soft skills as a strategy to build employability for their students and identify influencers of the implementation. In this book, soft skills are defined broadly as non-disciplinary skills that may be achieved through learning and be applied in study, work, and life contexts. As noted above, soft-skills implementation is context-dependent, but most studies related to soft-skills development in HE have been conducted in Western English-speaking countries. For this reason, Vietnam, a developing non-English-speaking country with a socioeconomic, cultural, and political context completely different from the West, provides an interesting case to expand the investigation of soft-skills implementation beyond the Western HE context.

Developing students' soft skills—as part of HE learning outcomes—has recently become a priority for Vietnamese universities. It is the response of Vietnamese universities to address the need of a skilled workforce as employers lament the shortage of soft skills in graduates (Bodewig & Badiani-Magnusson, 2014; Truong, Laura, & Shaw, 2018). Without a skilled workforce, the country will not be able to sustain its high socioeconomic growth rate (Anwar & Nguyen, 2014; Trinh & Doan, 2018) and compete in the process of regionalization in the Southeast Asian region (Jurje & Lavenex, 2015; Suci, Asmara, & Mulatsih, 2016; Tran & Nørlund, 2015). Their development of students' soft skills also derives from recent political initiatives regarding improving the quality of HE (Harman, Hayden, & Nghi, 2010; MOET, 2010, 2013).

Unfortunately, until now, there has been a lack of research examining how Vietnamese universities have been developing students' soft skills. Few studies have attempted to identify work skills that employers need, or assess graduates' attainment of these skills, and the perceived skills gaps, from the perspectives of employers, graduates, and students (Truong & Metzger, 2007; Tran, 2018; Tran, 2013; Tran & Swierczek, 2009). In other words, the existing studies seem to focus on output rather than process. Without investigating the process, it is difficult to identify the obstacles to remove so as to improve students' learning outcomes related to soft skills and to increase their employability throughout their career trajectories. Therefore, this book sets out to investigate the implementation of soft skills in Vietnamese universities using the perspectives and experiences of key agents of the implementation: university leaders and managers, academics, students and alumni—including employers. The book includes qualitative case

studies conducted in six Vietnamese universities (named A, B, C, D, E, and F), which represent different institutional contexts, and quantitative studies whose data were collected from a range of Vietnamese universities across the country.

This book is unique because it captures a holistic implementation of soft skills in a non-Western HE context. It highlights a number of factors influencing soft-skills implementation that have not been found in Western HE, thus complementing the existing literature and expanding our insights into soft-skills implementation in different HE contexts. Although the book is framed within one country, its value lies in its holistic investigation of the implementation across all levels of the HE system. This holistic analysis is different from other edited books that snapshot aspects of the implementation in different countries and put them in a one-book volume. This book provides important implications for moving forward with developing soft skills at the HE level in Vietnam and in other countries so that graduates can successfully obtain their first job and remain employable throughout their career trajectory.

Organization of the book

The remainder of this book is organized into 12 chapters. The first three chapters set the background contexts and practices for soft-skills development in the world and in Vietnam; the next eight chapters report on practices and challenges associated with various tasks at different levels of soft-skills implementation. While focusing on presenting the findings relevant to the topic of each chapter, the author will also link these findings to the international context to highlight the differences and similarities in soft-skills implementation in Vietnam compared to other countries. The last chapter summarizes the main findings of the whole book and discusses ways to move forward with the implementation, not only for Vietnamese universities but also for others internationally. The main content for each chapter is as follows.

Chapter 1 reviews the literature to underline the importance of developing students' soft skills in the current changing landscape of HE across the globe. It also highlights the various initiatives used to develop university students' soft skills across different HE systems, institutions, and disciplines. It argues that soft skills are implemented differently across disciplines due to differences in disciplinary characteristics; between institutions due to discrepancies in institutional missions and visions; and between countries due to different sociocultural, economic, and political contexts and educational values.

Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive literature review on practices and challenges related to soft-skills implementation in HE contexts. Based on this literature review and theories related to education-policy implementation, the author presents a four-level conceptual framework for soft-skills implementation in HE:

- **National level:** The general context of soft-skills implementation.
- **Institutional level:** All mechanisms and strategies for executing the soft-skills policy.

- **Curriculum level:** Setting soft skills learning objectives, teaching, and assessing these skills.
- **Extracurricular level:** The use of non-curricular activities for developing soft skills.

This framework will be used as a spine to link chapters in this book and guide the comparison of soft-skills implementation in Vietnamese universities with that of other countries.

Chapter 3 presents the context of soft-skills implementation in Vietnamese universities. It begins with depicting Vietnam as an emerging economy and a rapidly evolving society where there is a high demand for skilled workers to sustain its growth rate. Then it contradicts this picture by providing statistics about unemployment rates among university graduates and employers' complaints about the lack of soft skills in their employees. Against that national context, the chapter reports how Vietnamese universities are pressured by soft-skills-related policies issued by the central government, foremost the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), employers' demands, and students' and the general public's expectations. The chapter concludes that it is time for Vietnamese universities to put forth efforts to develop students' soft skills by taking into account available institutional advantages and tackling contextual factors.

Chapter 4 reports an analysis of interviews with 28 top- and mid-level university leaders of six Vietnamese universities about how soft skills have been implemented in their institutions. The study shows that, despite choosing different soft skills to impart, they conceptualize the implementation as developing work-readiness skills for students, either on a school-wide or university-wide scale. Methodologically, the six universities develop work-readiness for students via skills subjects and ECAs. They also encourage disciplinary teachers to embed soft skills into specialized subjects and use work-integrated learning. The study suggests that university leaders make use of all possible institutional advantages for the implementation; nonetheless, they face several obstacles, such as lack of curriculum autonomy, inexperience in policy implementation, a shortage of qualified staff, and lack of connection with external stakeholders—essential elements for successful implementation of soft skills.

Chapter 5 features the influence of institutional leadership on the success of soft-skills implementation. Comparing the deployment of comparable implementation strategies in two universities, this chapter indicates that leadership skills are essential for soft-skills implementation, especially considering differences in institutional contexts and the competition of other institutional reforms. Leadership styles may affect teacher and student engagement with executing the soft-skills policy. This study also points out that to implement the policy successfully, Vietnamese universities need more autonomy, accountability, and proactiveness instead of relying on regulatory bodies such as MOET. It also points out that soft-skills implementation is context-dependent; thus, a copy-and-paste approach will not work.

In Chapter 6, the author will report on teachers' beliefs, engagement behaviors, and factors influencing their engagement in developing students' soft skills in Vietnamese universities. Using 41 interviews with teachers of Business Administration programs in six Vietnamese universities, and 147 responses to a survey of disciplinary teachers from 27 Vietnamese universities, the two studies in this chapter show that teachers hold different beliefs about teaching soft skills and demonstrate their engagement in different acts of teaching, and that both of these are affected by several contextual factors. Based on the findings, this chapter argues that leadership should be exercised to change teachers' beliefs about the relevance of teaching soft skills, prepare them for such a new role, incentivize them, and remove obstacles so that they can engage with teaching these skills with confidence.

Chapter 7 reports a study that explores the practices and challenges of assessing students' soft skills in the Business Administration programs of six Vietnamese universities. Content analysis of interviews with 41 teachers of skills subjects and specialized subjects reveals that teachers are organizing different formative and summative soft-skills-assessment activities. Unfortunately, the analysis indicates that their practices are fragmented across subjects in the curriculum. Teachers' beliefs regarding their roles in the university, expertise in assessments, and several contextual factors are found to influence their assessment practices. The chapter argues that leadership should be exercised more effectively in order to remove obstacles and engage teachers with assessing soft skills, which will yield a washback effect on students' learning of these skills.

Chapter 8 presents a study that examines the contribution of internship experience on students' development of employability, including soft skills. Using the perspectives of 28 student interns, the study reveals that internships can help students develop many soft skills and technical skills, as well as the professional understanding and attitudes necessary for their future employment. It also reports challenges that hinder the effectiveness of this form of work-integrated learning experience. Students' awareness of the importance of the internship(s), collaboration between the university and industry, the role of the mentor, student efforts, etc. are identified as factors that influence the effectiveness of internships. The chapter discusses ways to improve the effectiveness of organizing student internships.

Chapter 9 reports a mixed-methods study about the effectiveness of developing soft skills for students via ECAs. Using six interviews with leaders of the Youth Union and associates, which are primarily in charge of organizing ECAs for students in Vietnamese universities, 18 interviews with current students, and responses to a survey of 423 students, the study suggests that these activities can contribute to the development of soft skills. However, the effectiveness of this initiative appears to depend greatly on student engagement, which is found to be associated with: (i) their beliefs about the benefits of participating in ECAs; (ii) their ability to balance formal education activities, part-time work, and ECAs; (iii) the availability of information about these activities; and (iv) the professional organization of these activities.

Chapter 10 offers two complementary studies that explore the contribution of external stakeholders to students' soft-skills development. Using 69 university leaders' and teachers' perspectives, the qualitative study, with a focus on the Business Administration of six universities, reports that external stakeholders can take part in different tasks to impart soft skills to students. However, they find that the involvement of external stakeholders depends greatly on institutional leadership, existing industry networks, and these stakeholders' availability. The quantitative study, with participation of 154 alumni, shows that they are willing to help develop soft skills for current students in different activities. However, several factors prevent them from participating—most influentially, lack of time, not being invited by the university, fear of bureaucratic practices in the university, and a lack of experience in curriculum or program development for such activities. The chapter argues that Vietnamese university leaders need to approach external stakeholders more proactively in order to negotiate how they can help current students develop soft skills.

Chapter 11 features student engagement with soft-skills development. The analysis of 461 responses to a survey and 18 interviews with current students from six universities shows that students are highly aware of the importance of soft skills to their future work and life. They tend to develop soft skills via non-curricular activities more than curriculum-based activities. They also demonstrate a high level of cognitive engagement with developing soft skills, but this does not translate so much into concrete behaviors. The study reveals that their engagement was affected by: (i) personal beliefs about whether these activities related to their self-interest; (ii) controlling factors such as time, effort, and cost; and (iii) third-party encouragement. The chapter argues that Vietnamese universities should focus on organizing suitable soft-skills activities that meet students' interests rather than basing them on their own perspectives.

Chapter 12 accentuates lessons for soft-skills implementation learned from the case study of Vietnamese universities. It argues that contextual factors significantly shape the development of these skills. It summarizes the key challenges to implementation presented in the previous chapters. Based on the findings, it discusses a number of initiatives so that Vietnamese universities in particular, and universities across the globe in general, can consider advancing the implementation of soft skills in their institutions. The chapter also acknowledges some limitations of the book and some directions for future studies.

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1 The surge in developing soft skills for students in higher education

Up to now, we have known that soft skills are an important component of graduate employability. Before going further, it is important to understand what soft skills are, their nature and components. This will enable us to understand the various ways to implement soft skills in higher-education institutions across the globe.

What are soft skills?

It is not easy to have a consensus on a definition of soft skills, since these skills are conceptualized differently between disciplines, contexts, and countries (see Table 1.1). For example, in Australian HE, this set of skills is often referred to as “generic graduate attributes,” “generic skills,” “key competencies,” “soft skills,” and “employability skills.” They are known as “key skills” or “core skills” in the UK; “essential skills” in New Zealand; or “necessary skills,” and “workplace know-how” in the USA (Bowman, 2010; Hager & Holland, 2006). In Vietnam, these skills are referred to as “soft skills” (*kỹ năng mềm*) or “life skills” (*kỹ năng sống*). In this book, the term “soft skills” will be used as it is a common term in the literature of different disciplines and in Vietnam, the main context of this book.

Table 1.1 Terms referring to soft skills in some countries (Bowman, 2010; Cinque, 2016)

<i>Countries</i>	<i>Equivalent names for soft skills</i>
Australia	Generic graduate attributes, generic skills, key competencies, employability skills
UK	Key skills, core skills, life skills, key transferable skills, cross competencies
USA	Necessary skills, workplace know-how
New Zealand	Essential skills
Germany	Schlüsselkompetenzen (key competencies), Übergreifende kompetenzen (general competencies)
Denmark	Nøglekompetence (key competencies)
France	Compétences transversales (transversal competencies)
Spain	Competencias genéricas (general competencies)
Vietnam	Kỹ năng sống (life skills), kỹ năng mềm (soft skills)

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Associated with different terms are a variety of definitions for soft skills. Some authors view soft skills in relation to whether these skills are innate abilities and are skeptical about whether students can be trained in them. For example, Heckman and Kautz (2012) define soft skills as personality traits, goals, motivations, and preferences that are valued in the labor market, in school, and in many other domains. Knight (2007) defines soft skills as wicked competences; others consider these skills as emotional intelligence (see Kyllonen, 2013; OECD, 2015) or non-cognitive skills, such as perseverance, sociability, and self-esteem (Heckman & Rubinstein, 2001). Non-cognitive skills and emotional skills have been found to “influence numerous measures of social outcomes, including better health, improved subjective well-being and reduced odds of engaging in conduct problems” (OECD, 2015, p. 3). Yet in reality, “soft skills include both social/interpersonal skills and [...] the capacity to work on competences, to reframe and transfer them from one field to another, even from informal to formal learning” (Cinque, 2016, p. 394).

Some organizations define soft skills from administrative and management viewpoints, distinguishing soft skills from the remainder of learning outcomes of a certain level of education. For example, using the terms “generic graduate attributes,” the Higher Education Council of Australia defined soft skills as “the skills, personal attributes and values which should be acquired by all graduates, regardless of their discipline or field of study” (Treleaven & Voola, 2008, p. 20). Likewise, Bowden et al. (2000) defined generic graduate attributes as:

... the qualities, skills and understandings a university community agrees its students should develop during their time with the institution. These attributes include but go beyond the disciplinary expertise or technical knowledge that has traditionally formed the core of most university courses. They are qualities that also prepare graduates as agents of social good in an unknown future ... (as cited in S. C. Barrie, 2007, p. 440).

In most cases, soft skills are defined in relation to technical skills. Technical skills are “those skills acquired through training and education or learned on the job and are specific to each work setting” while soft skills are “the cluster of personality traits, social graces, language skills, friendliness, and optimism that mark each one of us to varying degrees” (Litecky, Arnett, & Prabhakar, 2004, p. 69). Robles (2012) contrasted hard skills with soft skills, in which the former is the technical expertise and knowledge needed for a job, whereas the latter includes interpersonal skills and personal attributes. Davis and Muir (2004, p. 96) defined:

... soft skills are attitudes and behaviors displayed in interactions among individuals that affect the outcomes of such encounters. These differ from hard skills, which are the technical knowledge and abilities required to perform specific job-related tasks more formally stated in job descriptions. (p. 96)

More conceptually, Weber, Finley, Crawford, and Rivera Jr (2009, p. 356) point out that soft skills are “interpersonal, human, people or behavioural skills needed

to apply technical skills and knowledge in the workplace.” Echoing this viewpoint, Laker and Powell (2011, p. 112) view soft skills as “intra-personal skills such as one’s ability to manage oneself as well as interpersonal skills such as how one handles one’s interactions with others.”

It is also noted that some organizations or authors do not provide a concrete definition of soft skills but rather provide a list of examples of such skills for free interpretation. For example, the Malaysian Institute of Higher Learning interprets soft skills as non-academic skills such as communication, critical-thinking and problem-solving, leadership, teamwork, entrepreneurship skills, ethics and professional morals (Shakir, 2009). Mitchell, Skinner, and White (2010) consider that soft skills include leadership, self-management, conflict resolution, communication, emotional intelligence, and so on. Hager and Holland (2006) further explain that soft skills mostly cluster around human activities such as communication and working with each other, gathering and ordering information, and problem-solving (p. 2). They are seen as capable of enhancing work effectiveness, especially regarding the rapidly evolving and interconnected world we are living in now.

With the myriad terms used to refer to soft skills, as well as differences in the perspectives of researchers and governmental bodies, it is little wonder there has been a lack of consensus in coming up with a definition. Nevertheless, the importance of developing soft skills in HE as one way to enhance graduates’ employability is acknowledged by all. Regardless of the availability of a definition of soft skills, it may not be applicable to the Vietnamese HE context, where some different terms have been used to refer to soft skills, albeit without any concrete definitions. Therefore, in this book, soft skills are defined broadly as non-disciplinary skills that may be achieved through learning and be applied in study, work, and life contexts. This definition allows some space to include various conceptualizations of soft skills, which could significantly influence their implementation.

Nature of soft skills

Understanding the nature of soft skills is vital for the successful implementation of these skills in a HE context. Despite there being few studies on the nature of soft skills, it seems that there is a consensus in this respect. Soft skills are found to be elusive, discipline-relating, and transferable between contexts. They cluster and complement each other. They require substantial time and practice to grow to a level where they can be used naturally.

Firstly, these skills are elusive. People have talked a lot about these skills and their importance in the modern workplace as well as in personal life. However, when it comes to providing a clear description of what they are, it is not easy at all (Knight, 2007). That partly explains why there are several definitions of soft skills, as reported above. People of different fields of study may describe these skills differently depending on which stance they hold. If they are more related to social values, they would consider these skills in terms of social benefits. Conversely, if people are business-oriented, they would view these skills in terms of socio-economic gain. This will be further illustrated by the cases of the Tuning

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Educational Structures in Europe project (Tuning) and the Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) project below. The elusive nature of soft skills causes many difficulties for the execution of soft skills policy in HE, as stakeholders do not have a consensus on what they should teach, as well as how to teach and assess these sorts of skills.

Secondly, despite the term “generic skills” used to denote soft skills, these skills are discipline-related in the sense that the importance and balance of these skills varies across disciplines (Barrie, Hughes, Smith, & Thomson, 2009; Jones, 2010). For example, written communication skills for students in social sciences may not be as technical and terminological as those for students in engineering. Communication and interpersonal skills are vital for journalism students, but they are less important for biotechnology students who spend most of their time working in the lab. This implies that soft skills should be taught within the disciplinary context. However, in practice, many prefer to treat soft skills as “generic” across disciplines and contexts of application possibly to ease the management of the implementation process. This may result in ineffective implementation of soft skills in educational contexts.

Thirdly, soft skills are transferable between learning and work contexts (Bridges, 1993; Hind, 1994). This characteristic reflects well the term “generic skills” in that in every learning and work context, these skills can be found. Once we master a soft skill within a particular setting, we can use it again in a different setting. For example, an IT technician can transfer problem-solving skills learned from his or her role in a bank to a textile manufacturer because most tasks would deal with computers and similar issues. However, in order to transfer these skills between the two work settings, he or she would need some time to adapt the skills to fit in with the “content” of a new work setting and focus. The problem-solving skills are the same, but the “material” on which these skills are applied is different, so they need modification. This characteristic of soft skills suggests that when developing these skills for students, activities need to be diverse so that they can flexibly practice these skills. This would enhance their ability to transfer soft skills across different work settings.

Fourthly, existing research suggests that soft skills exist as clusters of different but complementary skills which dynamically combine with each other differently in different contexts (Bowman, 2010; Gonczi, 2006; Hager & Holland, 2006; Tuning Educational Structures in Europe, 2019). Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how a businessperson can communicate effectively to his or her clients without interpersonal skills. Likewise, teamwork may not achieve expected outcomes if team members fail to communicate with each other to discuss, negotiate, and agree on solutions to solve the problems facing them. Problem-solving ability will not suffice if it does not involve critical thinking and/or creativity. This suggests that soft skills should not be imparted skill by skill; they must be taught and assessed together rather than by single skills, preferably within the context of a discipline (Ang, D’Alessandro, & Winzar, 2014).

Finally, soft skills take a great deal of time to develop, even one’s entire life (Knight, 2007). That is why many soft skills are often classified under lifelong

skills, which are essential for our modern life where knowledge is growing exponentially (Dehkord, Samimi, Alivand, & Sani, 2017). The Introduction discussed a study conducted by Groh, Krishnan, McKenzie, and Vishwanath (2016) where they tested the impact of short soft-skills training courses on young Jordanian women's employment outcomes. They did not find any correlations between them. Exposed for 45 hours over a nine-day period to several soft skills might have been enough time for these women to get a general idea about what these skills were, why they were sought after by employers, and how they might affect their job applications, but it was unlikely that these women could master these skills and put them into practice. Gonczi (2006) argued that soft skills need time and practice to grow. Indeed, it is easy to validate this claim. Just imagine public-speaking skills, which are important for most businesses. Although we may read several how-to books or watch YouTube videos to learn from those who have mastered these skills, we may still end up stuttering in front of a crowd, even if we have rehearsed several times. Without regular practice, soft skills may not stay with us or be summoned for effective use when needed. This essential nature of soft skills suggests that training courses must be organized within a long enough time span to offer students numerous chances to practice the skills in order to master them.

What soft skills are the most relevant for the 21st century?

Identifying a list of soft skills most relevant for the 21st century is not simple because, in our rapidly changing market realities, the skills needed constantly alter. However, reviewing the frameworks of soft skills that international organizations recommend, frameworks that are based on sound research, may give us a general view about what skills should be taught to young generations so that they can function well in the modern era.

Table 1.2 shows that there is no one definitive list of generic skills. Each list has been compiled under the influence of global, local, and organizational factors. For example, in the World Health Organization list, there are soft skills that enhance human well-being (coping with emotion, stress, and empathy), whereas other lists do not emphasize these. Likewise, the list of soft skills appears to change through time, taking into account the current essential elements of society. For example, the Institute for the Future list includes several skills to enhance our ability to work with information technology (new media literacy, computational thinking, virtual collaboration), an essential element of our contemporary society. Regardless of disparities, these lists share some commonalities, which can be classified, with examples, as follows:

- **Basic skills:** Literacy, using numbers, using technology.
- **People-related skills:** Communication, interpersonal, teamwork, customer-service skills.

Table 1.2 Different soft-skills frameworks for the 21st century (Cinque, 2016)

<i>Organization</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Skills</i>
World Health Organization (WHO)	1993	Life skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decision-making and problem-solving • Creative thinking and critical thinking • Communication and interpersonal skills • Self-awareness and empathy • Coping with emotions and coping with stress
Istituto per lo Sviluppo della Formazione Professionale dei Lavoratori	1994–1998	Transversal skills	<p>Useful to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diagnose the nature of the environment and task (mainly cognitive skills) • Relate to people and issues of a specific context (interpersonal or social skills, which is the emotional skill set, cognitive and behavioral styles, but also communication skills) • Address, that is to “face, cope, predispose to deal with the environment and the task, both mentally and emotionally ... take action on a problem with the best chance of solving it” (be able to set goals, to develop strategies, and to build and implement action plans)
Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)	2003	Key competencies for a successful life and a well-functioning society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using tools interactively, which includes the capacity to use language, symbols and texts interactively, use knowledge and information interactively, use technology interactively • Interacting in a socially homogenous group—i.e., relate well to others, cooperate, work in teams, manage and resolve conflicts • Acting autonomously, which includes key competencies that empower individuals to manage their lives in meaningful and responsible ways by exercising control over their living and working conditions (for example, form and conduct life plans and personal projects, defend and assert rights, interests, limits and needs)
European Union	2006	Key competences for life-long learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication in the mother tongue • Communication in foreign languages • Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology • Digital competence • Learning to learn • Social and civic competences • Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship • Cultural awareness and expression

Organization	Year	Name	Skills
Tuning Educational Structures	2008	Generic competences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instrumental competences—i.e., cognitive abilities, methodological abilities, technological abilities and linguistic abilities • Interpersonal competences—i.e., individual abilities such as social skills (social interaction and cooperation) • Systemic competences—i.e., abilities and skills concerning whole systems (combination of understanding, sensibility and knowledge; prior acquisition of instrumental and interpersonal competences required)
OECD	2009	21 st century skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information: “Information as source” (searching, selecting, evaluating and organizing) and “information as product” (restructuring and modelling of information and the development of own ideas/knowledge) • Communication: “Effective communication” (sharing and transmitting the results or outputs of information) and “collaboration and virtual interaction” (reflecting on others’ work, creation of communities) • Ethics: “Social responsibility” (applying criteria for responsible use at personal and social levels)
Institute for the Future	2011	Future work skills 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense making • Social intelligence • Novel and adaptive thinking • Cross-cultural competency • Computational thinking • New media literacy • Trans-disciplinarity • Design mindset • Cognitive load management • Virtual collaboration

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- **Conceptual/thinking skills:** Collecting and organizing information, problem-solving, planning and organizing, learning-to-learn skills, critical thinking, creativity.
- **Personal skills and attributes:** Being responsible, resourceful, flexible, having self-esteem, management skills.
- **Skills related to the business world:** Innovation skills, enterprise skills.
- **Skills related to the community:** Civic or citizenship knowledge and skills.

Soft-skills-development initiatives in higher education worldwide

Recognizing the importance of soft skills in our modern life, international organizations, governments, and HE institutions worldwide have launched many initiatives to develop soft skills. These initiatives appear to be influenced by the socioeconomic, cultural, and political contexts of the country as well as the visions and missions of the institution.

International initiatives

On a global scale, a number of influential activities around soft-skills development have recently been initiated by supranational organizations, among which the Tuning and AHELO projects are most relevant to the HE context. Generally, despite the difference in purpose and scope, both projects highlight the importance and relevance of generic skills in current socioeconomic contexts. Furthermore, both projects take into account the differences in educational culture and tradition between education systems when tackling the issues related to HE learning outcomes in general and soft skills in particular.

In Europe, the Tuning project was implemented in 2000. It aimed to establish a measure to compare HE curricula across European countries (González & Wagenaar, 2003). It has now spread to other parts of the world, forming Tuning Latin America, Tuning Africa, Tuning China, etc. (Tuning Educational Structures in Europe, 2019). It introduced the concept of competences as the basis for the learning outcomes of HE programs for use in the European HE space. “Learning outcomes are statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completion of learning” and “competences represent a dynamic combination of knowledge, understanding, skills and abilities [which] will be formed in various course units and assessed at different stages” (Tuning educational structures in Europe, 2019). The project also made clear technical and generic competences. While acknowledging the importance of technical competences as the basis for university-degree programs, Tuning emphasizes that generic competences (i.e., soft skills) are becoming more relevant for students’ futures in terms of employability and citizenship. During Phase 1, the project also produced a list of most relevant generic skills for each field and across fields of study, based on consultation with graduates, employers, and academics. It is also interesting to note that while Tuning attempts to create compatibility and comparability across HE programs in Europe, it does not look for uniformity in the degree programs or curricula but simply looks for points of reference, convergence, and common understanding. Put differently, Tuning appears to protect the rich diversity of European education, appreciates the independence of academic and subject specialists, and respects local and national authority (Tuning Educational Structures in Europe, 2019). This notion suggests that the selection and development of subject-specific and generic competences vary across disciplines, institutions, and countries depending on the bounded contexts.

Taking a different approach, the AHELO project launched by the OECD attempted to create a new instrument to test students nearing the end of a bachelor's degree. The main rationale for the test was that current assessment methods were inadequate to meet the challenges posed by the technological changes in the 21st century (Coates & Richardson, 2012). The test focused on both soft and technical skills; however, for the trial, the project only focused on the economics and engineering disciplines. In terms of soft skills, the test was developed based on the adaptation of the US Collegiate Learning Assessment (Hardison & Vilamovska, 2009). Students taking this test needed to use critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem-solving and written communication to answer several open-ended questions about a hypothetical but realistic situation and gather necessary evidence from different sources. The results were to be used for comparing students internationally regardless of language or cultural background in order to provide data of actual quality of learning and its relevance to the labor market. The AHELO project was expected to create an impact in the HE sector, just like the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which is a measure to test the skills and knowledge of students at 15 years of age. The AHELO project involved 10 HE institutions in each of the 15 participating countries across the globe, most of which are leading economies (Australia, Belgium, Columbia, Egypt, Finland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Kuwait, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden, and the USA). However, AHELO was critiqued to be unfit to all educational systems concerning cultural differences; thus, its reliability needed verifying (Tremblay, Lalancette, & Roseveare, 2012). Regardless of the failure of the AHELO project, assessing HE learning outcomes is still on the OECD's agenda: a new project that evaluates HE learning outcomes was reported to follow the AHELO project (Sharma, 2015).

Contrasting the two projects with regard to their perspective towards soft skills, AHELO is more concerned with the economic aspects of soft skills whereas Tuning, launched within the framework of lifelong learning, seeks both personal and social gain. The difference appears to relate to the role of the two organizations. The OECD is an organization promoting economic development; thus, it may appear more profit-inclined in most actions. Meanwhile, the European Union (EU) plays the role of moderator of its member states with respect to cultural diversity, political complexity, and social cohesion. Such a difference between the two projects indicates different intentions behind launching programs for soft-skills development, and these intentions need to be examined closely.

Despite the differences, both projects converge at two points. Firstly, both are interested in and concerned with generic-skills development for HE students. This suggests that generic skills have attracted policy makers on a global scale. Secondly, both organizations are aware of cultural differences between HE systems. The AHELO project did not succeed in making the test accepted across countries due to the feasibility of administering it and difficulties in validating the reliability of the test across all HE systems. The EU does not use competences as prescriptive elements to inform the curricula of programs in the European HE space but as references and comparative elements instead. Such cultural awareness

suggests that soft skills may be selected, prioritized, and developed differently across HE systems.

National initiatives

Nationally, in many countries, developing soft skills for university students has become a major concern of policymakers, HE leaders, and academics, and seems to be driven by political factors. The UK, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Korea, Japan, Canada, Denmark, Switzerland, France, and South Africa have established national qualification frameworks, which specify the learning outcomes for all levels of education in each country. At the HE level, it is observed that soft skills are included as an integral part of the learning outcomes and are linked to quality-assurance and public-funding schemes (Danish Government, 2008; Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2008; Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2013; Thai Government, 2006; The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2014). The influence of political factors on elevating the role of soft skills in HE will be illustrated by the cases of British and Australian higher education, as follows.

Since the 1980s, the British Government and employers have articulated the need for training students in generic, transferrable skills as a key aspect of employability. However, soft skills were not a central issue in HE at the time. Not until the Dearing Report (published in 1997) were universities encouraged to develop program specifications with intended learning outcomes including knowledge and understanding, key skills, cognitive skills, and subject-specific skills (Atlay, 2006). Then the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland provided a more detailed description of knowledge, skills, and competencies that graduates of a British university should possess in terms of disciplinary knowledge and understanding, ability to apply the knowledge and understanding, communication and cognitive skills, qualities and transferable skills for employment purposes (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2008). The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2014) in the UK has also passed the framework for HE qualifications and required degree-awarding bodies in the UK to comply with it.

In Australia, there have been many projects promoting the implementation of generic graduate attributes—an alternative term for soft skills in Australian HE—in recent decades. In 1992, the Mayer report (Mayer, 1992) encouraged tertiary institutions to develop seven competencies for students: collecting, analyzing and organizing information; communicating ideas and information; planning and organizing activities; working with others in teams; solving problems; using mathematical ideas and techniques; and using technology. The report appeared to influence the VET (Vocational Education and Training) sector and vocation-oriented universities significantly, but did not engage all Australian universities with soft-skills implementation due to the lack of a political mechanism. Then the National GAP project (2007–2008) was conducted to explore the progress

and identify challenges to the implementation of soft skills in the Australian HE sector. The research team reported a slow and sporadic implementation across the HE system with numerous challenges along the way (Barrie, Hughes, & Smith, 2009). The researchers recommended linking soft-skills implementation with quality assurance to boost its progress (Barrie, Hughes, Smith, & Thomson, 2009). The Hunters and Gatherers project (2011–2013) was carried out by seven Australian universities to document the mapping of learning objectives related to soft skills in the curricula and evidence students' achievement of the objectives. This project was significant in that it urged the universities to explicitly include soft skills in the curriculum, deliver and assess them, and find ways to present their students' achievement of soft skills (Lawson et al., 2013). Most influentially, established in 2011, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) issued the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) and Higher Education Standards Framework (HESF). TEQSA, as described on its website, "registers and assesses the performance of HE providers against the Higher Education Standards Framework." The "learning outcomes and assessment" section in the HESF strongly reflects the AQF, which includes soft skills as part of the HE learning outcomes. It is then possible to conclude that the arrival of the AQF and HESF has politically made soft skills an indispensable component of the Australian HE curricula.

It is also observed that the implementation of soft skills has been influenced by the socioeconomic, cultural, and political context of each country. For example, the Danish National Qualification Framework suggests that Denmark focuses on developing lifelong learning for students (Danish Government, 2008), which seems to derive from the need to better use the aging labor workforces and enhance the Danish flexicurity economic model (Bredgaard & Madsen, 2018; Klindt, Baadsgaard, & Jørgensen, 2017). In other words, characteristics of the labor workforce and economy may influence the selection of relevant soft skills for students to develop. Meanwhile, the Thai National Qualification Framework for Higher Education appears to require Thai universities to focus on developing moral and ethical qualities for students (Thai Government, 2006). This focus appears to be significantly influenced by Thailand being a Buddhist country and by the fact that the country is attempting to preserve "Thai wisdom" (Chaisinthop, 2014; Chansomsak & Vale, 2008; Ma Rhea, 2018; Pimpa, 2011). As such, prominent cultural values may be taken into consideration when identifying and developing soft skills for students. In other countries, such as China, political and citizenship education is one of the central missions of the education system (Banks, 2007; Kennedy, Fairbrother, & Zhao, 2013), suggesting that the political regime of a country also influences soft-skills implementation.

In short, the literature review suggests that while countries may engage in implementing similar initiatives for improving the quality of HE learning outcomes in general and soft skills in particular, the focus of these initiatives is influenced by the cultural, socioeconomic, and political contexts of each country.

Institutional level

Many universities publish the mission statements and learning outcomes of their institutions, including soft skills, on their websites. It is observed that the selected soft skills may look similar in terms of word choice; however, they diverge across institutions and reflect the underpinning characteristics of that institution. For example, years after the Mayer competences were encouraged for students, Pitman and Broomhall (2009) analyzed the statements of learning outcomes available on the websites of 38 Australian universities. The analysis revealed that communication, interpersonal skills, and problem-solving were most mentioned in the learning outcomes statements across the universities. The researchers also suggested differences in the selection of the intended soft-skills outcomes between groups of universities: Group of Eight (Go8), the Australian Technology Network (ATN), Innovative Research Universities Australia (IRU Australia), New Generation Universities (NGU), and the Unaligned Universities (UU). Such differences appeared to associate with the mission of each university. For example, the Go8 comprises Australia's oldest universities, which all have a strong liberal arts tradition; thus, 86% of the statements of this group have moral attributes compared with 50%, 67%, 56%, and 63%, respectively, in the other groups. Similarly, IRU Australia leads the other groups in terms of selecting "critical and analytical thinking" (100%) because they are more focused on innovation and research. These findings indicate that the discrepancy in soft-skills selection across universities of the same education system is likely to depend on the surrounding contexts as well as the defined missions and purpose of an institution.

In 2009, Barrie, Hughes, and Smith (2009) explored progress in implementing graduate attributes across the Australian HE sector. They found that soft skills were conceptualized differently depending on how a university viewed itself in relation to the external world. If it appreciated students' performance in the workplace, soft skills were defined more closely to the notion of employability skills; if it valued the graduates' future and their quality of life, soft skills were more about preparing the students for the unknown future; and finally if its mission was linked to and strongly influenced by professional bodies or accreditation agencies, soft skills were more about compliance with the qualities and skills determined by these organizations. Thus, it is possible to conclude that the selection of soft skills is different across HEIs contingent to their defined mission and vision or the perceived purpose of HE, which was raised by the B-HERT project a long time ago: "the contemporary focus on generic skills is really part of a bigger, as yet unresolved, debate about the purpose of university education and how to develop educated persons who are both employable and capable of contributing to civil society" (B-HERT, 2003, p. 6).

HE institutions are also observed to use different strategies and approaches for the implementation of soft skills. Universities can implement soft skills institution-wide (Fleming, Donovan, Beer, & Clark, 2010) or program-wide (O'Neill, 2010; Willcoxson, Wynder, & Laing, 2010). They can execute the implementation top-

down, bottom-up, or a combination of both (Barrie, Hughes, Smith, & Thomson, 2009; James, Lefoe, & Hadi, 2004). Some institutions develop soft skills independently of disciplinary knowledge while some integrate them into the disciplinary curriculum (Al-Mahmood & Gruba, 2007; Barrie, Hughes, & Smith, 2009; Jääskelä, Nykänen, & Tynjälä, 2018). Pedagogically, soft skills are developed via problem-based learning (Hendriana, Johanto, & Sumarmo, 2018; Ibrahim, Al-Shahrani, Abdalla, Abubaker, & Mohamed, 2018; Vogler et al., 2018); community-service learning (Eike, Myers, & Sturges, 2018; Mak, Lau, & Wong, 2017; Payton, Barnes, Buch, Rorrer, & Zuo, 2015); online and distance learning (Brodie, 2011; Myers et al., 2014; Salleh, Tasir, & Shukor, 2012); and work-integrated learning (Losekoot, Lasten, Lawson, & Chen, 2018; Maclah, Aman, Mohamed, & Ramli, 2012; Tran & Nguyen, 2018). Finally, methods applied to soft-skills assessment also vary but mostly include capstone subject, (e)-portfolio, peer-assessment, and external assessment (in case of internship or work-placement) (Cranney et al., 2012; Hughes, Mylonas, & Ballantyne, 2017; Keller, Parker, & Chan, 2011; Palmer, Holt, Hall, & Ferguson, 2011). In an attempt to explain such discrepancy in the strategies and approaches to soft-skills implementation, Al-Mahmood and Gruba (2007) and S. C. Barrie (2007) suggest that such differences can be attributed to the underlying assumption and attitudes towards soft skills held by each institution and its stakeholders.

Thus, it is indicated that soft skills can be addressed differently across HE institutions based on stakeholders' perception and attitudes towards soft skills as well as institutional missions and visions. Initiatives for developing soft skills for students at the institutional level will be elaborated on in the next chapter.

Conclusion

In short, soft skills can be understood differently by individuals of different roles or organizations of different functions. It can be used as a general term to refer to non-technical skills. These skills are elusive, discipline-relating, and transferable between contexts. They cluster and complement each other and require substantial time and practice to grow to a level where they can be used naturally. Soft skills have become an essential part of HE curricula and developing soft skills for students has become a priority in the operation of HE institutions. Despite differences in approaches, the implementation of soft skills is commonly driven by political, socioeconomic, and cultural factors as well as a country's educational values. Most of the literature related to soft-skills development for enhancing graduates' employability derives from Western-developed and English-speaking countries. There has been a lack of similar research in developing, non-English-speaking countries whose politics, socioeconomic status, cultural features, and educational values may be different. It is useful to investigate the implementation of soft skills in these countries to complement existing literature in building soft skills for employability in HE so that our understanding about this issue can be extended.

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Notes

Chapter 3

- 1 In Vietnam, HE institutions are not allowed to enroll students as they wish; instead, they follow the quota annually allotted by MOET, as at the time this book is written.

Chapter 4

- 1 Disciplinary teachers are teachers who teach specialized subjects in the Business Administration program.
- 2 Skills teachers are teachers who teach subjects that train students in certain soft skills, such as communication skills, computer skills, and English skills.
- 3 The Youth Union and associates is a socio-political organization established by Ho Chi Minh under the Communist Party. It is installed in each school and university in Vietnam and is in charge of political education and leading social-engagement activities.

Chapter 5

- 1 1 credit is equivalent to 15 face-to-face teaching sessions of 45 minutes for theoretical subjects.

Chapter 6

- 1 Students are classified as external stakeholders because they only stay with the university for a limited time and are not involved in the internal affairs of the university, except those related to their learning.

Chapter 7

- 1 The YUA are socio-political organisations under the Communist Party of Vietnam that are installed in each school and university, primarily in charge of political education and leading social engagement activities.

- 2 At the time of research, the MOET regulated that an undergraduate program should be organised within 120–140 credits, where a credit is equivalent to 15 sessions of 45–50 minute face-to-face teaching–learning.

Chapter 8

- 1 KSAOs refer to knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics.

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