



## The problem with soft skills: exploring a new conceptualisation to a holistic approach

### Key Words

Study Smart, academic literacy, holistic, soft skills, hard skills, employability

### Abstract

A common question in higher education currently is ‘how do we prepare university students for future careers and employment?’. This is arguably an important consideration and, in the case of most graduates, the end goal of their student career. However, the current debate mainly links employability to ‘skills’ and suggests that our future students are not prepared for employment (in both employability and expectations). It is time to move away from the rhetoric of employability and shift focus to consider who has responsibility for developing graduate skills. The concept of ‘skills’ is most often broken down into hard skills (technical/known) and soft skills (generic/behavioural). However, substantial ambiguity exists around how to classify these skills, which can affect the ability to embed these skills in curriculum. A question that remains unanswered is, ‘how we can look at this from a holistic skills based approach?’ Literature shows (Coll and Zegwaard, 2006; Robles, 2012) that soft skills have garnered the market as the focus for curriculum reform in recent years. However, Chamorro-Premuzic, Arteche, Bremner, Greven, and Furnham (2010) point out that researchers still do not know enough about soft skills, especially in the context of higher education, where there are differing opinions and classifications of skills. This difference shows an insight into why such an ambiguity exists in trying to determine an approach and theory to soft skills versus hard skills. However soft skills remain a big driver of current curriculum reform (Karim et al., 2012). Herein lies a problematic paradigm around how to generate meaningful curriculum for today’s students whilst retaining academic rigour. In fact, by trying to address the ambiguity of this divide, a false binary is created in which no definitive answer is ever possible. Hirsh and Bevan (as cited in Holmes, 2011) identify that although there may be a shared language of skills there is still no shared understanding of what this means. The answer may not actually be in reinventing a list of hard and soft skills. It may be a case of embracing the ambiguity and then looking at how a holistic skills agenda will help us provide the way forward. Even though generic skills are linked with success in employment and higher education institutions have been delegated by default to deliver these skills in education (Hill, Walkington, and France, 2016), this is not enough to develop the required capacities of students for a modern world (Australian Council of Learned Academics, 2016). The purpose of this research is to respond to the current skills debate. Not by showing that one skill set (e.g. hard skills or soft skills) is more important than the other or that there needs to be a redefinition of the graduate competencies, graduate attributes and employability skills. It is to identify that there is an underlying skills theme throughout all these levels and higher education requires a new perspective in an embedded holistic skills based approach. The question then remains, who can make this happen, and how?

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