


*International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*  
Vol. 24, No. 3, pp. 725-739, March 2025  
<https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.24.3.34>  
Received Jan 15, 2025; Revised Mar 12, 2025; Accepted Mar 17, 2025

# The Requirements of Integrating Soft Skills into Higher Education Curricula within the Context of Transformative Education

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**Abstract.** Transformative education theory is one of the key concepts of the 21st century. It aims to teach learners the knowledge, skills, and soft skills to prepare them to be skilled and responsible citizens in their society. In this article, we examine the importance of soft skills in Mongolia's higher education curricula to investigate whether Mongolian universities recognise these societal demands and incorporate soft skills effectively. The object of the research was the English language education curriculum in four Mongolian public and private universities, and the curriculum analysis method and focus group interview were employed to find answers to the research questions. The findings revealed that different terms were used to express soft skills, and universities incorporate various soft skills. However, the target curricula did not include soft skills tailored to specific majors. For instance, we focused on the four curricula for English teaching education, but half of them incorporated only one or two specific soft skills for future English language teachers. Therefore, it was concluded that soft skills are insufficient to incorporate into the curriculum. It was also noted that hard or technical skills are emphasised more than soft skills in the curriculum of the universities targeted in this research. Given the evidence, it is difficult to determine whether the skills acquired by graduates meet the employers' requirements. In this case, higher education institutions in Mongolia must integrate soft skills into their curricula to convey key concepts of transformative education and ensure equal emphasis is placed on knowledge, skills, soft skills and teaching methods.

**Keywords:** Soft skills; 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills; hard skills; higher education institutions (HEIs); curriculum

## 1. Introduction

According to the 5<sup>th</sup> UNESCO Forum on Transformative Education report, education must teach young people the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to live cooperatively, be flexible, think critically, respect diversity, care for the

environment and actively find solutions both locally and globally (UNESCO & APCEIU, 2021). These are also known as 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills.

Additionally, this report emphasises that some challenges remain in effectively implementing transformative education. One of these is that education in the modern era focuses solely on the workplace. Therefore, some recommendations were given by the forum, including integrating transformative education into curriculum, pedagogy and assessments. Furthermore, it is not only an issue in the education sector, but developing 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills has also been one of the vital issues in the education industry and labour market over the last few years. Employers commonly seek creative minds and talents who can quickly adapt to new circumstances and work efficiently. Regarding the challenge employers have faced, there has been a skills gap in the global labour market or a mismatch between new graduates' skills and employers' expectations; the graduate skills gap is also a widespread global issue (QS, 2019). McKinsey's Education to Employment report illustrates that 39% of employers express that a skills shortage is a leading reason for entry-level vacancies (Mourshed et al., 2013).

For this reason, businesses see skills gaps in the local labour market as the foremost barrier to industry transformation. Effective reskilling and upskilling strategies for the next five years are essential for maximising business performance (World Economic Forum, 2023).

Based on the latest recommendations from UNESCO and various research findings from QS, McKinsey and other researchers, higher education institutions (HEIs) must revise their programme learning outcomes and update their curricula. In this context, Cimatti (2016) concluded that it is essential to refresh the educational frameworks based on employers' needs.

In other words, HEIs have to incorporate soft skills into the curriculum while focusing on knowledge and professional skills to be responsive. In this case, an emerging question is which soft skills will be necessary in future workplaces and how they will be acquired.

To explore the understanding of soft skills in tertiary education, particularly in Mongolian universities, and how these skills are incorporated into the curricula that prepare teachers, this paper includes a literature review to identify the definitions and applications of soft skills in higher education and the need for their development. It also presents research, including curriculum mapping analysis and focus group interviews, to investigate the current situation regarding incorporating soft skills into the curricula. Additionally, it discusses what Mongolian higher education institutions should pursue in the future concerning their curricula, followed by a conclusion summarising the findings on integrating soft skills into the curricula of HEIs and outlining the necessary actions to enhance the situation.

This article explores whether the required soft skills for various majors are included in Mongolian higher education institutions' curricula and whether

these institutions view soft skills as an essential component of their programmes. Furthermore, the article identifies the significance of soft skills in transformative education.

## 2. Literature Review

In the context of transformative education, several terms and meaning are used when referring to 'soft skills' because they are intangible (Padhi Kumar, 2014; Touloumakos, 2020).

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), soft skills are explained as key competencies (OECD, 2001). Also, currently, they also employ the term "skills for social progress" (OECD, 2015). The European Commission has defined the term as the capacity to work on competencies and transfer them from one field to another (EC, 2011).

Recently, the OECD has referred to crucial competencies for a successful life and a well-functioning society (OECD, 2001), and the European Union has referred to them as competencies critical to lifelong learning or transversal skills (European Union, 2011). Moreover, terms such as 21st-century skills, generic skills, fundamental skills and competencies all refer to soft skills.

Furthermore, some researchers define soft skills as entailing adaptability, flexibility, integrity, professionalism and responsibilities (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Touloumakos, 2020). This is similar to the Mongolian education system where some education-related documents refer to attitude, personal and social skills as soft skills, particularly the standard requirement for higher education degree programmes in Mongolia. Cimatti (2016) identifies the different terms for soft skills and summarises them as personal transversal competencies such as social aptitudes, language and communication capability, friendliness and ability to work in a team, and other personality traits characterising relationships between people. Social skills such as communication and teamwork are often accepted as soft skills in practice.

Based on the related literature, researchers have classified soft skills into several groups. For instance, Shakir defined seven soft skills: communication skills, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, teamwork, lifelong learning and information management skills, entrepreneurship skills, ethics, and professional moral and leadership skills (Shakir, 2009). His classifications include almost all soft skills mentioned in other research papers.

To summarise the above-mentioned related literature, soft skills can be divided into three classifications:

1. Personal-related skills include self-esteem, self-management, self-awareness, positive attitude, time management, ethics and professionalism, and life-long learning (Cimatti, 2016; Shakir, 2009).
2. Entrepreneurship skills include identifying problems, finding solutions, being creative and innovative, exercising critical thinking and judgement, engaging in analytical thinking, making decisions, managing

risks, implementing change management, and demonstrating leadership (Cinque & Kippels, 2023; Ngang, Yunus et al., 2015; Touloumakos, 2020).

3. Social skills include communication, teamwork, management, negotiation, networking, conflict management, and responsibility (Cimatti, 2016; Cinque, 2016).

Furthermore, work ethics are considered an essential soft skill in the labour market (Succi & Canovi, 2020): this skill is regarded as one of the most crucial soft skills in workplaces. Based on the definitions mentioned above, Jabri (2023) summarised that soft skills are non-cognitive skills defined in various ways. For example, some emphasise personality, while others highlight transversality, and still others focus on transferability and employability.

This article has adhered to the concept that soft skills encompass social or interpersonal skills (Cinque & Kippels, 2023) and employability skills (Jabri, 2023). Additionally, soft skills must also be conceptualised in a broad sense as competencies transferable from job to job, from company to company, and from one economic centre to another (European Union, 2011). Therefore, HEIs need to define the specific soft skills for each major. Once the definitions of soft skills are evident, discussing how to develop students' soft skills might be more manageable.

Although employers' demands are not the sole reason for focusing on soft skills, this article connects the development of soft skills with the demands of the workplace and the goal of transformative education to limit the framework. To clarify this, QS Global employer surveys in 2020 and 2022 reveal that employers seek skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, flexibility and interpersonal in new graduate hires (QS, 2022). Furthermore, the Bloomberg research carried out in 2015, investigating the MBA market (Master in Business Administration) in the USA, emphasised that the most desired and hardest-to-find skills are communication, leadership, problem-solving and strategic thinking skills (as cited in Climate, 2016).

The World Economic Forum report (2023) also highlights that the top five required skills are analytical thinking, creative thinking, AI and big data, leadership, and social influence flexibility and agility. Research institutions have already accepted the importance of soft skills in workplaces and communication. In addition, employers now demand prospective applicants possess the technical skills to get the work done and the soft skills necessary to communicate and work with a team (Harvard Business Publishing Education, 2024). Some soft skills are more commonly used and required in specific jobs. For instance, teachers have to acquire more personal and social skills than others because of their daily teaching activities. These skills will make a difference in the quality of teaching and practical learning (Ngang, Yunus et al., 2015). These soft skills, such as communication, creative thinking, problem-solving and teamwork, support teachers in providing practical strategies and techniques while dealing with problems during teaching and learning (Ngang, Yunus et al., 2015).

However, the skills teachers have to acquire can vary and be problematic to identify precisely. According to Kanokorn et al. (2014), soft skills for teachers are ethics, morality, different bodies of knowledge, interpersonal skills and responsibility. Furthermore, related literature shows that teachers' five essential soft skills are communication, critical thinking and problem-solving, teamwork, lifelong learning and leadership (Tang, 2020).

In this case, educators need to discuss practical ways of teaching soft skills to students majoring in teaching. Regarding soft skills development, HEIs should reconsider their curricula to ensure they include all relevant soft skills in the programme learning outcomes, and reflect the methods and activities used to develop them. However, defining specific methods that work well for all students to acquire soft skills is complicated.

Although it might not be practical to include all necessary teaching methods, all curricula must include all potential methods. For example, game-based learning was found to be effective for software engineering students (Garcia et al., 2020), extracurricular and campus-based activities could be suitable for some students (Feraco et al., 2023), and many educators have used problem-based (Deep et al., 2019) and project-based approaches to develop students' soft skills.

Soft skills can be developed through extracurricular activities (Ngang, Chan et al., 2015), support programmes and teachers' daily teaching methods. Academic regulations and effective teaching methods should align in the implementation process. Although HEIs identify relevant soft skills for their students, not all can successfully achieve the goal (Mitashree Tripathy, 2021). Therefore, HEIs should pay more attention to designing a curriculum that includes all essential soft skills and effective methods and approaches to acquire them.

Regrettably, reviewing previous research conducted in Mongolian tertiary education was impossible as there has been no research on integrating soft skills into Mongolia's higher education curricula. This was highlighted during the focus group interview wherein the participants noted that Mongolian HEIs had only conducted market research and needs analysis surveys of employers through their internal quality assurance departments to identify the essential soft skills necessary for students to thrive in the workplace. This was the sole source for examining Mongolian universities' recognition of essential soft skills when designing curricula. This article will explore how these soft skills are incorporated into the curricula of universities that prepare teachers of English language professionals.

### **3. Research Methods**

This study aimed to clarify three specific questions: (1) Are soft skills clearly defined in the curricula of Mongolian tertiary education? (2) What soft skills are incorporated into the English teacher education curriculum? and (3) What actions do Mongolian higher education institutions need to take regarding soft skills in the future?

To find the answers to these questions, we conducted both qualitative and quantitative research methods: focus group interviews and analysis of the curricula of the targeted universities.

Regarding qualitative research methods, we interviewed two teachers and two department heads from four public and private universities in Mongolia that train English language teachers. The interviews were recorded for analysis. The aim was to explore how Mongolian universities define soft skills and to gather insights from experienced teachers regarding the role of soft skills in the teaching profession.

We conducted the analysis using the curriculum mapping method, which is a quantitative research method. This analysis involved reviewing the curricula of four universities to examine the development of soft skills, identifying which soft skills have been incorporated into them, and describing how they have been delivered.

## **4. Research Results**

### **4.1 Focus group interview analysis**

Teacher Educator (T1) is a senior lecturer who has worked as the head of the department at one of the Mongolian public universities, and she is one of the most experienced teachers in her field. She has been working in the leading position for nine years.

Teacher Educator 2 (T2) leads the department at one of the private universities in Mongolia and has been working in the leading position for four years.

Teacher Educator 3 (T3) is a senior lecturer at one of the Mongolian public universities. She is recognised as an experienced teacher with about 20 years of experience.

Teacher Educator 4 (T4) is a senior teacher at a private university who has been working for about 15 years.

### **Integration of soft skills in the curriculum for the teaching profession at Mongolian universities**

T1 informed us that some soft skills have already been incorporated into the curriculum-related documents. Her university has carefully worked on curriculum development since 2014 and has been improving it. As a result, they have focused on three essential components of the curricula: knowledge, skills and attitude. The soft skills, grouped under the term "attitude" include intercultural communication, respect for others, appropriate communication, pride in others' success, and the ability to work in a diverse cultural setting.

T1 added, *"It still needs to be clarified how soft skills are defined and what types of soft skills should be incorporated into the teaching curriculum because this term is relatively new to all of us"*.

T2 answered, *“My university has worked on the curriculum for the last few years, including some soft skills. However, they are referred to as attitude”*.

T3 commented, *“Curriculum development has recently been conducted at my university. Based on the employers' satisfaction survey results, a few soft skills, such as teamwork and being environmentally friendly, have been incorporated into this newly designed curriculum. However, it is still in the development process”*.

T4 responded, *“My university has recently redeveloped the curriculum, so some soft skills have been integrated. However, most of them are related to students' attitudes”*.

Based on the participants' answers, soft skills are still integrated into the teaching profession's curriculum. However, the definition of soft skills needs to be determined, and different terms, such as attitude and soft skills, have been used.

### **Identification of soft skills for the teaching profession**

According to T1, her university conducted various types of research, including satisfaction surveys from employers such as secondary school principals and managers, across multiple stages to develop the curriculum. Based on the findings, the university incorporated both knowledge and soft skills into the new curriculum. The curriculum development team also compared several international curricula and examined global trends.

T2 said that her university conducted employers' surveys and other market research to renew the curriculum.

T3 explained that, while developing the curriculum, her university also conducted employers' surveys (the secondary schools where their students did their short – and long-term internships). The methodology used was interviews and questionnaires.

In addition, she said,

*“The curriculum development team worked on the job advertisements to identify the employers' demands”*.

T4 stated that her university conducts annual market research and employer satisfaction surveys, integrating the findings into all curricula.

T4 highlighted, *“My department emphasised graduates' employability and organised questionnaires annually. Based on the results, we revised the curriculum”*.

The target universities have surveyed employers and conducted comparative research on soft skills relevant to the teaching profession. These initiatives indicate that the universities acknowledge the evolving demands of employers and have started to incorporate the findings into their curricula.

### **Reflection of soft skills in official educational documents that universities follow**

T1 responded that her university had followed the general requirements for higher education curriculum and included all the soft skills in this document. In addition to this, they include other soft skills that employers demand. T2 had the same answer: her university follows the standard requirement for higher education degree programmes and incorporates soft skills into it. T3 added that her university also followed that official ministry document and included all requirements in the curriculum. T4 answered that her university's curriculum included soft skills in the general higher education requirements. They also added more specific soft skills to the curriculum based on their research findings.

In conclusion, all four universities have adhered to the general requirements for higher education curricula and integrated the essential soft skills into their programmes. Some soft skills identified through market and employer research also appear to be included. Therefore, the study indicates that the general requirements for higher degree programmes should specify all essential soft skills that must be incorporated into curricula.

### **Teachers' role in incorporating soft skills in curriculum design and development**

T1 emphasised,

*"My university teachers participate actively in the curriculum design, so our understanding of soft skills could be much better than that of other university teachers" My university has also organised several teacher training sessions regarding curriculum design and soft skills".*

T2 thinks that teachers' roles and willingness to incorporate soft skills in the curriculum vary for each teacher. There is no specifically designed training for teachers to deliver soft skills at her university.

T3 mentioned, *"My university has a specific assessment system for students' attitudes, so the teachers' understanding of soft skills is good enough to mark the students' perspectives".*

T4 responded, *"My university organised some seminars for teachers regarding curriculum development. However, it is not certain that each teacher precisely focuses on and values soft skills. I think teachers still focus more on knowledge and professional skills".*

Defining and incorporating soft skills into curricula must be an essential duty of all higher education institution teachers. Teachers deliver the curriculum and guide students to acquire soft skills through various teaching methods and activities. The curriculum will only be implemented successfully if teachers understand soft skills sufficiently.



### **How do students acquire soft skills, and what effective methods have been used?**

T1 said, *“Soft skills are acquired by the students in daily learning and teaching. For example, teachers should be role models with a positive attitude, be responsible, and direct students well”*.

T2 answered, *“My university has an assessment system to evaluate soft skills. In this context, students strive to develop such soft skills. For instance, some first-year students initially prefer to work independently. However, they gradually adapt as teachers emphasise the importance of these skills, explaining how they are vital for their future careers and personal lives”*.

T3 responded, *“Effective methods for delivering soft skills include the activities teachers employ in the classroom. For instance, collaborating in teams of diverse students encourages them to step out of their comfort zones and creates opportunities for students to discover solutions independently”*.

T4 expressed, *“Creative methods and tasks enhance students' soft skills. I believe that soft skills are cultivated through classroom and co-curricular activities”*.

In conclusion, universities and their educators have pursued various methods and activities to teach soft skills. It has been shown that an essential step is identifying and integrating specific soft skills into the curricula. Once the curricula clearly outline these soft skills, educators will work diligently to discover effective methods for training their students.

#### **4.2 Curriculum Analysis**

We utilised curriculum mapping to analyse the curricula of four universities in the teaching profession, including both public and private institutions.

Regarding curriculum analysis, an official document in the Mongolian education system is called the General Requirements for Higher Education Curriculum. This document specifies that two general classifications of soft skills are required. Higher education institutions (HEIs) in Mongolia must follow this guideline when designing and developing their curricula. Initially approved in 2014, this document remained effective until a new version was recently released. Additionally, it is important to note that we worked on this document in 2014, as Mongolian HEIs still need to update their curricula to align with the new regulations.

In the first stage, we compared the soft skills outlined in Mongolia's general requirements for the higher education curriculum with those identified in the universities' curricula for the teaching profession.

Based on the comparison, half of the analysed universities' curricula incorporated all the targeted soft skills listed in the general requirements for higher education. The other 50% covers over 60% of those targeted soft skills in their curricula. The targeted universities integrate many of the soft skills

outlined in the official document from the Education Ministry of Mongolia into their programmes.

However, the list of soft skills in the ministry document does not include specialised skills for various professions. Therefore, this document only outlines essential soft skills and allows HEIs to incorporate specific soft skills into their curricula based on their market research.

### **Incorporated soft skills in the curricula for English teaching at targeted universities**

The next stage was to compare the soft skills in the four universities' curricula for the teaching profession. During the analysis, we proved that universities used different terms for soft skills and classification. For instance, two universities used "attitude" to refer to soft skills. U1 and U3 worked on their curriculum development, incorporating more soft skills into their curricula and classifying them into subgroups.

**Table 1: Incorporated soft skills in the curricula for English teaching at targeted universities**

Curricula at the target universities	Total number of the soft skills in the curricula	Number of the soft skills' classification
C1	12	2
C2	8	N/A
C3	18	3
C4	4	N/A

Table 1 illustrates that each curriculum in the research included a different number of soft skills. The highest number is 18, and the lowest is four. Those soft skills are classified into up to three categories: person-related, profession-related, communication and cooperative, and creativity and lifelong learning skills. However, the two curricula do not classify soft skills; instead, they define a set of soft skills.

Although it is impossible to list all essential soft skills, this table proves that the definition of soft skills and their importance in the curricula is critical in Mongolian HEIs.

### **What soft skills are in the targeted curricula?**

Although an official document states that soft skills must be incorporated in all Mongolian tertiary curricula, we aimed to identify what soft skills are included in the curricula of the English teaching profession.

C1 used "attitude" instead of soft skills; no classifications or categories exist. This curriculum covers 12 different soft skills for the English teaching profession. In terms of the soft skills classification, this list combines several classifications, such as personal, social and cognitive skills. This curriculum included more specific skills for the teaching profession than other curricula. However, not all of them can be considered soft skills.

C2 formulated the set of skills, including knowledge, skills and attitudes, and has the same soft skills as C1. However, their term looks broad because it covers basic personal knowledge, skills and attitudes. The list has eight skills, but some refer to soft skills, as the curriculum explains. Those soft skills are mainly related to personal and social skills. Based on the curriculum document, C2 should have focused more on soft skills.

C3 has three soft skills classifications, and the total number of soft skills incorporated into the curriculum is 18. In addition, C3 includes almost all soft skills in the general requirements for the higher education curriculum. That document contains several classifications of soft skills, some hard skills and some knowledge. Therefore, it can be summarised that C3 followed the official document that Mongolian HEIs have followed.

C4 has soft skills for the English teaching profession, but no classification exists. C4 also used the term “attitudes” instead of soft skills. Based on the soft skills classifications, some of them, such as being self-organised and respecting others, can be related to social soft skills. C4 incorporated fewer soft skills in the curriculum than other curricula.

According to the curriculum mapping analysis, there are various terms for soft skills, and the universities we've focused on are developing their curricula in response to modern needs and demands. Regarding the development process, soft skills are incorporated into curricula, which differ considerably. One of the primary reasons is that they adhere to the general requirements for higher education curricula in Mongolia, which do not specifically detail soft skills for each profession. Additionally, the curricula we analysed lack active social interactions and activities that can assist students in acquiring soft skills essential for their employability.

The only commonality among the universities is their shared understanding of the importance of nurturing their students' soft skills.

## 5. Discussion

Soft skills are critical to implementing transformative education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, so educators and employers have long valued the importance of developing soft skills. Several studies have been conducted in this field, and educational institutions have applied potential activities to build soft skills. However, the question remains and demands more research in the future.

The official document outlining general requirements for higher education curricula in Mongolia states that all graduates must acquire several soft skills. However, the document does not specify which soft skills are necessary for particular majors.

The document included personal development along with both hard and soft skills. In other words, it contained a combination of skills and personal growth but did not feature a separate list of soft skills. By examining the list, we can

identify several soft skills, such as innovation, problem-solving, decision-making, interpersonal skills, and communication. As a result, the university curricula we compared in the study adhered to this document and included a blend of soft and hard skills. Fifty per cent of the curricula we analysed integrated the soft skills that are listed in the ministry document.

In this case, this ministry document must advise HEIs to explore the necessary soft skills for various majors and incorporate them into their curricula.

During the focus group interview, participants emphasised the importance of clarifying the terms related to soft skills and highlighted the benefits of integrating specific soft skills into the curricula. Consequently, our primary challenge is defining soft skills for each profession and ensuring a shared understanding.

According to the curriculum analysis, we have found several categories of soft skills for English teachers. The commonly used categories in the curricula are person-related, profession-related and communication. However, the categories vary in each curriculum. Two curricula identify soft skills into several categories and provided detailed explanations, whereas the other two curricula have very general definitions for soft skills and include four to eight soft skills for teacher education. This means that, although universities prepare for the same profession, they teach their students different soft skills.

This is the second complicated issue regarding developing soft skills for the English language profession.

This study's primary limitation is that it focused solely on integrating soft skills into English teacher education curricula and analysed the current cases of four Mongolian universities. However, gaps appear in the incorporation of soft skills within the curricula of Mongolian higher education institutions, which necessitates further research.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study aims to determine whether Mongolian higher education institutions integrate soft skills into their curricula to meet the demands of modern society. Labour market trends and employers' expectations are increasingly becoming essential components of each HEI's curriculum in response to society's evolving needs. Therefore, HEIs must consider including all necessary knowledge and soft skills in their curricula.

We conducted focus group interviews and analysed four public and private universities to achieve this goal.

Consequently, it has been noted that incorporating soft skills into the curriculum and ensuring students effectively acquire them poses challenges, as learning soft skills differs significantly from gaining academic knowledge.

Based on our findings, we recommend the following actions for Mongolian higher education institutions:

First, Mongolian authorities in charge of curriculum documents and HEIs must appropriately determine soft skills and make them straightforward for all stakeholders. Otherwise, several terms, such as attitude, personal skills and personal development, are used interchangeably.

Second, HEIs in Mongolia need to reconceptualise their curriculum learning outcomes and include the soft skills in demand based on the employers' satisfaction surveys. Our findings show that HEIs have paid more attention to hard skills than soft ones.

In practice, graduates can improve their professional knowledge using many sources, but without soft skills they cannot perform a single action in the workplace. Therefore, developing soft skills is an essential aspect of the curriculum.

Third, Mongolian HEIs that prepare English language teachers should consider which soft skills are more critical for future teachers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, how they should be incorporated into their curricula, and how those soft skills will be delivered successfully.

Finally, once the soft skills are defined precisely and incorporated into curricula, the next step will be to study how to deliver soft skills in teaching and how students obtain them successfully in learning.

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