



**An exploratory study of priority Soft Skills
for the Future of Work and the implications for FET
in Ireland**

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Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Education is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

Signed:

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Marie Clary".

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Abbreviations

CEDEFOP	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training Central Statistics Office
DES	Department of Education and Skills (Science pre-2010).
E+ Expertise	Erasmus + Programme for European Mobility and Exchange of
EGFSN	Expert Group on Future Skills Needs
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
EUCEN	European University Continuing Education Network
ESC	European Solidarity Corps
ETB BoardsIreland	Education and Training Board ETBI Education and Training
EQF	European Union European Qualifications Network
EU	European Union
FESS	Further Education Support Service
IFF	Institute for the Future
Leargas	National Agency for European Programmes
NFQ	National Framework Qualifications
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PIAAC	Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies
PLC	Post-Leaving Certificate
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SLMRU	Skills and Labour Market Research Unit, in SOLAS
SOLAS	An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna –
UNESCO VET	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation Vocational Education and Training
WEF	World Economic Forum

Abstract

The Future of Jobs report (World Economic Forum, 2020) maps the job and skills requirements of the future. The report finds that automation, coupled with Covid-19 is creating what is referred to as, a 'double disruption' for workers (p. 5). To successfully negotiate a changing work environment people will need Soft Skills such as adaptability, resilience, inter and intrapersonal communication, tolerance of ambiguity and emotional intelligence. According to Newman (2014), Emotional Intelligence is already a differentiating factor in high-quality leadership, and it is increasingly a key employability criterion. This research aims to identify the priority Soft Skills required for the future workplace and the implications for Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland functions in developing learning and training pathways for key Soft Skills. It examines the perceptions of stakeholders about what they understand Soft Skills to be; seeks to understand how they are defined in the various stakeholder domains; identify the priority Soft Skills for the post-Covid workplace and discuss teaching and learning strategies that would enhance the acquisition of Soft Skills. The research is qualitative, interpretivist in approach and conducted through an exploratory case study; there is a broad range of participant from business settings, HR, training bodies, FET, as well as recent college graduates. Research methods included semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. Results show issues with nomenclature across all sectors, the term 'Soft Skills' being inadequate in capturing the constituent elements. Employers confirm a skills gap at graduate level indicating that while highly qualified, graduates lack the practical Soft Skills requirements of the modern workplace. Priority Soft Skills are identified as Empathy, Resilience, Emotional Intelligence, Listening and adaptability. Soft Skills, while intrinsic to primary education at policy and practice levels, tend to lessen in post primary and do not feature explicitly at this time as a taught skills in FET. This research shows that there may be a need to revisit a national understanding of Soft Skills, and the structures and strategies required to deliver them within FET work-based training systems to meet emerging demand.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This current study, entitled '*An exploratory study of the priority Soft Skills for the future of work and the implications for FET in Ireland*', is a qualitative study that addresses the identification of priority Soft Skills for the future of work. It explores the implications for Further Education and Training (FET) provision in upskilling people for a workplace that is characterised by the impact of Covid-19, rapid technological transformation, and new models of work. The purpose of this research is to identify emerging priority Soft Skills, create a *thoughtful construct classification* for Soft Skills, as highlighted by Grugulis and Vincent (2012), and to methodologically inform the provision of Soft Skills within FET in order to align with future skills needs.

The aim of this study is to establish what is understood by the term Soft Skills; to identify those priority Soft Skills for the future of work from the perspectives of the employer, the FET education provider, and the new entrant to the workplace. The study further aims to explore the contribution of these Soft Skills to enable employees to effectively navigate the turbulent reality of the post-covid workplace and demonstrate the manner in which Soft Skills contribute positively to individual wellbeing.

The rationale for this study derives from the now largely acknowledged importance of these skills and their under-recognition in the workplace. For clarity, it is necessary to describe *the workplace* as it pertains to this study. There are many different kinds of workplace, such as voluntary, charity, SME's, public sector, private sector, multi-nationals, associations and many more, but for the purposes of this study, the workplace is identified as large, corporate, professional service environments, with both national and international reach. They are high-pressure, high-performance workplaces, where work hours are long, and expectation is high.

1.1 The Research Question

The method of investigation for this study is an exploratory Case Study (Yin, 2019). The central research question asks:

What are the priority Soft Skills needed for the new world of work?

Soft Skills are widely regarded as important in the post-Covid workplace, but the wide-ranging terminology creates confusion which is only exacerbated by theoretical dispersion and methodological inconsistency, as identified by Marin-Zapata et al. (2021, p. 1) in their systematic review of Soft Skills literature. They conclude that this dispersion and inconsistency contributes to the myriad definitions and labels that currently exist. Business contexts refer to them as 'uniquely

human capabilities' (WEF, 2020); 'CORE' Skills (Parlarmis and Monnot, 2018); 'Human Centred Skills Intelligence' (CEDEFOP, 2022); and Transversal Skills (FET, EU Commission). This list is by no means exhaustive and will be further expanded upon in the Literature Review. This confusion makes it necessary to ascertain, for the purposes of this current study, an understanding of the full scope of nomenclature and to identify what research participants understand Soft Skills to be.

1.1.1 How do research participants define 'Soft Skills'?

The thematic confusion and methodological inconsistency across the literature, according to Marin-Zapata et al. (2021), gives rise to the first sub-question, which asks how research participants define Soft Skills, as well as to establish their understanding of the concept as a whole. Marin-Zapata et al. (2021) also find that across the literature on Soft Skills, the terms skills and competencies are used interchangeably, giving rise to even more confusion.

1.1.2 What are the most valuable Soft Skills in order of priority?

It is well documented that the world of work is changing due to the impact of technology, societal change, and existential crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic and Climate Change. This sub question seeks to identify what research participants consider to be the *priority* Soft Skills, given the demands of the post-Covid workplace, and to explore their perceptions of the impact of Covid-19 and technology transformation, in driving the new prioritisation of these skills.

The workplace will see a growing demand for socio-emotional, creative, technological and higher cognitive skills, where Soft Skills for leadership, managing complex relationships, and taking initiative will also be in demand. The topic of Soft Skills is cross disciplinary, with relevance in the areas of business, psychology, and education (Lund et al., 2020).

The most recent WEF Future of Jobs report (2023) highlights Soft Skills third, behind the cognitive skills of analytical and creative thinking. The most important Soft Skills are suggested to be resilience, flexibility and agility; motivation and self-awareness; and curiosity and lifelong learning – in recognition of the importance of workers' ability to adapt to disrupted workplaces.

1.1.3 How can FET optimally teach these priority Soft Skills?

The final sub-question relates to establishing optimum approaches regarding the teaching and learning of Soft Skills within FET to accommodate current and future needs. Lopez and Lopez (2020) conducted a thematic and bibliometric review of research carried out between 2010 and 2020 on transversal competences taught as part of vocational education and training. They

conclude that there is a lack of research at VET level and that more empirical research needs to be conducted on how transversal competences develop and how they can be acquired (p.17). The new FET Strategy (2020-2024) suggests that work, learning, and interpersonal engagement is already impacted by technology advancement and will intensify going forward, thus education providers will need to 'fully embed technology in the delivery of learning or else risk becoming irrelevant' (p. 5).

1.2 Research Participants

The research participants for this study comprised four different participant cohorts: 1) Employers, 2) FET Directors and Policymakers, 3) FET tutors, and 4) new entrant employees (graduates). This was a specific sample group and limited to 53 participants in total. However, it is a highly expert sample, specifically invited to participate because of the rich data they could provide, and thus represent a broad range of experience and perspective. As such, the aim was not to get consensus across all groups but rather to identify overlap and alignment, regarding Soft Skills needs.

The Employer cohort is a blend of Chief Human Resource Officers (CHRO's) and Chief Executive Officers (CEO's). CHRO's were favoured for participation over CEO's because CRHO's are those people most closely associated with determining the range of skills needed via workforce planning and establishing the skills pipeline for the workplace. They are required to anticipate skills needs and resource implications for the business based on their intimate knowledge of business strategy. These are also the people within the workplace who are conversant on Soft Skills at a deeper level and so their expertise would yield richer data.

A specific and small sample of senior medical participants were consulted with regard to this study because, as providers of initial, postgraduate, and professional education to the medical profession, there was a wealth of informed opinion and good practice relating to Soft Skills. In recognition of the need for upskilling in the area of Soft Skills within the medical profession, a new module was introduced into the initial medical curriculum in 2021, focusing on Self-awareness, Professional Identity, and Resilience. This would be delivered throughout the 6-year initial medical course of study. This provided a unique opportunity to assess the rationale for inclusion of this module and the performance of this new module during the fieldwork for this current study.

FET Directors and policymakers are those informed on FET reform and future policy orientation. This cohort of participants provided strategic perspective on new FET policy including the FET College of the Future strategy and the reconfiguration of levels 1-6 as foundational (levels 1-2)

intermediate (levels 4-5) and bridging (levels 5-6). As this current study is primarily focused on the workplace, the focus within FET is on provision at levels 5 and 6, as these levels focus on progression, either to tertiary education or to the workplace.

FET Tutors are those most informed on what actually happens in a FET classroom, with regard to Soft Skills. FET tutors report lack of consultation with regard to current reforms and bring clarity to the role of the FET tutor and the somewhat precarious conditions under which they work. They are the people who are required to deliver reform on the ground and have much to say about the ambition of FET reform being built on such unstable and precarious foundations.

The new-entrant employee cohort is a group of 20 graduates attached to one professional services firm and with whom this researcher would work at intervals over a 12-month period. As the field work was carried out during Covid-19, I was fortunate to have access to these young people via an online platform. These graduates provided recent information on the level of exposure they had to Soft Skills education across their entire education journey and offered their perspective on priority Soft Skills for work as new entrants.

1.3 Researcher Practitioner

The researcher practitioner has a career spanning three decades in the fields of education and training and business, initially as a second-level teacher, then supporting Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Youth sectors to develop European education partnerships. In the most recent decade, they have worked as a Management Consultant providing training, facilitation, and coaching at national and international level, with a client-base spanning Professional Services; Government Departments; Public Sector Organisations; NGO's; Academic Agencies and Technology Providers. Consequently, this researcher-practitioner has direct experience and strong beliefs as to the positive value of Soft Skills and a deep knowledge of the subject area, which will be elaborated upon in Chapter 4 - Methodology. Observations made over this long career relate to the limited recognition of Soft Skills in the workplace, including the de-prioritisation of these skills in favour of technical skills, as well as a glorification of hard skills. These observations include:

- Disregard and lack of recognition or de-prioritisation of the contribution that Soft Skills can make to enhancing performance, both to the wellbeing of the individual employee and to supporting their resilience in the face of challenge and stress.
- Good Soft Skills have a positive impact on Leadership – these leaders tend to inspire, have well-managed egos, and are more likeable.

- Senior Management in highly competitive workplaces tend to be dismissive of Soft Skills in favour of Hard Skills.
- Employees do not have work-life balance – needing time to recalibrate but being unable to prioritise self-care due to demands of work and long working hours.
- Those with the ability to self-regulate and with higher levels of Emotional Intelligence (EQ) tend to have a higher tolerance for uncertainty and rapid change in the workplace (Newman, 2014).
- Those lacking Soft Skills struggle in management roles, finding that the management role requires the achievement of their goals through the work of others, constituting a different relationship with the work and requiring a different skills set beyond the technical.
- Organisational values and purpose are not lived in the day-to-day interactions of the workplace.
- Workplaces characterised by low levels of empathy and high levels of competitiveness appear to drive the prioritisation of hard/technical skills.
- Frequently, the cumulative value of Soft Skills acquisition is not recognised by the learner or employee until they look back, often several years after the fact, at the journey travelled, identifying Soft Skills acquisition as a pivot point in their career and life. Due to this long timeline, capturing the value of Soft Skills can be a challenge.

Over the last three years – during and post-Covid – new assertions relating to the importance of Soft Skills are now supported in the academic literature and drive the need for change (Singh et al., 2020; de Lucas Ancillo et al., 2021; Kotsiou et al., 2021; Widad and Abdellah, 2022; Joynes et al., 2019; Winter et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2022).

1.4 Macro-economic and Socio-political Context

1.4.1 Covid-19 and Work

A brief outline of the context serves to demonstrate how a global health and economic threat happening rapidly, and at scale, can have a significant impact on the experience of society in terms of life and work, as has been evidenced by our collective experience of the Covid pandemic. Remote working became the norm and childcare services were suspended, resulting in the blending of home and work in a way not seen before. Only those classified as frontline workers, medical professions, associated health services, and critical financial services continued in situ, with the added stress of an unknown, potentially existential threat (World Economic Forum, 2020).

Ng et al. (2021, p.1) identify Covid as a Transboundary Crisis, one that impacts all elements of the social system, bringing significant disruption to every aspect of people's lives and negatively impacting work and work-related well-being. It has been described as '*the most widespread and profound occupational health crisis in modern times*' (Shoss, 2021, p. 26). Ng et al. (2021) assert that organisations now have a critical role to play in providing safe workplaces with appropriate resources to deal with increasing issues pertaining to mental health. Key future work trends have been accelerated by the pandemic and some of those changes have only served to reinforce and exacerbate work-place inequality. They identify seven core areas impacted by the pandemic: Remote work; Gig work; Displacement of work; Compensation; Benefits; Work-life balance and Mental Health.

Although organisations and employees demonstrated significant adaptability in pivoting to a remote environment during the early stages of Covid (Al-Habaibeh et al., 2021), the pace of work and expectation of workplace leaders is creating a lack of balance in the lives of employees, with individuals experiencing high levels of stress. Fair (2022) identifies a sharp increase in levels of depression and stress related mental health issues emerging post-Covid, some of which could be moderated by better levels of self-awareness and Soft Skills. Post-Covid, the pace of work and life is accelerating, and Soft Skills need to be strengthened at all levels – personal, professional, organisational, and societal – to enable people to address a changing and uncertain world as it emerges.

1.4.2 Technological Transformation

According to Skillnets (2022), because of the impact of the pandemic, March to December 2020 – a period of nine months – represented the equivalent of a decade of accelerated progress in terms of digitisation and work practice. Such is the impact of the technological, structural, and social change that is being experienced at such pace that it creates uncertainty and necessitates leading from the future as it emerges (Scharmer, 2016). Many of the major changes experienced due to the impact of the pandemic had beginnings that predated Covid-19, for example, globalisation and digital transformation had already affected work practice (Skillnet, 2022).

The Future of Jobs report (WEF, 2020) identifies the double disruption of automation coupled with the pandemic, estimating that by 2025, 85 million jobs will be eliminated or reoriented because of the changing distribution of tasks between people and technology. Socio-technical Theory (STT) underpins the transition from the Fourth Industrial Revolution (I4.0) to Industry 5.0 (I5.0) which identifies I4.0 as technologically deterministic (Fair, 2021, p. 1), where humans added value to the technological processes to I5.0, which highlights the interdependencies between

technology and humans. According to Fair (2021), Socio-technical theory argues for a mindset change from 'Profit-above-all to Prosperity-above-all' (p. 1). The application of STT in I5.0 focuses on achieving a symbiotic relationship between humans and technology, moving beyond the technological determinism of I4.0 (Kagermann, 2022). As Chin (2021) predicts, I5.0 will 'bend back toward the service of humanity' (p. 1).

Henderijkx and Stoffers (2022) suggest that digitalisation is a disruptive process impacting the whole workplace and requires an Altro-centric or other-centred approach to leadership. They identify empathy, compassion, humility, and integrity as key Soft Skills and determine that leadership competency needs to be redefined through this lens for a digital world.

1.4.3 Global Risk

Covid brought multiple risks which are divided into distinct categories by the WEF (2022): *societal, environmental, economic, technological, and geopolitical*. Until recently, the most significant of these risks was identified as economic, resulting from a possible prolonged recession; however, as the global community emerges from the impact of the Covid pandemic, the Russian/Ukrainian conflict gives rise to new geopolitical risks, environmental concerns, and economic policy uncertainty (Pata et al., 2023). The business environment is described by the acronym, VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) (Lawrence, 2013). The acronym gained more salience after the 2008 global financial crisis and references the instability, chaotic economic and physical environment that was faced at that time (Sullivan, 2012). Since Covid, this term has increased relevance in describing the environment for most organisations (Taksan et al., 2022).

1.5 Why Soft Skills?

While the importance of Soft Skills is becoming more widely acknowledged, there is a need to understand and identify the specific Soft Skills that will be most valued in the future of work. Marin-Zapata et al. (2021) in their systematic review of the Soft Skills literature point out that the terms *Individual Competencies* and *Soft Skills* are often used interchangeably and there is little consensus in concept definition. Matteson, Anderson, and Boyden (2016) describe the treatment of the term Soft Skills as 'fuzzy and murky' (p. 71). While these issues of confusion and blurriness, with regard to Soft Skills, pre-date the Covid pandemic, there is increasing need to resolve this to accommodate the changes of the post-Covid workplace.

1.5.1 Soft Skills and Mental Health

Well-developed Soft Skills are protective factors for positive mental health as they contribute to psychological stability (Sackell and Walmsey, 2014). These are the skills that ground the individual, that help to navigate challenges and deal with adversity. They underpin resilience and enable people to deal with uncertainty and rapid change. They are also the skills that are distinctly human, though not, as yet, replicable or substitutable by technology and Artificial Intelligence (WEF, 2020).

1.6 Why FET?

In 2018, the government of Ireland set out a new policy framework “Supporting Working Lives and Enterprise Growth in Ireland” for employee development opportunities in Ireland as part of the annual Action Plan for Education. It included as a stated aim a vision of the workplace in Ireland where the ‘provision in further education and training which supports employee development is flexible, high quality, accessible and relevant to the changing needs of employees, the economy and industry’. In particular, one of the key drivers of this policy was the development of Soft Skills in the workplace (2018, p. 6).

The National Skills Strategy 2025 (2016) refers to transversal skills as the ‘building blocks for the development of the hard or vocational or technical skills required to succeed in the labour market’. The report states that the skills identified by enterprise include innovation, creativity, entrepreneurship, teamwork, communication and business acumen, and entrepreneurship (Department of Education and Skills, 2017, p. 33). The Strategy also contends that ‘there is a rising demand for more high level cognitive and interpersonal skills. The skillsets of people in elementary occupations and those in higher skilled occupations will need to be developed in this constantly changing environment’ (2016, p.32).

Over many years, much good work has been achieved through the European placement modules; these placement modules are undertaken as part of FET level 6 programmes, with financial support from Erasmus+. The experience helps to both build technical experience in a person’s chosen subject area but also to support Soft Skills acquisition. Programme evaluations highlight the positive learning accruing to both individual FET learner and FET tutor alike deriving from intercultural placement experience (Leargas, 2021). The key finding of note in the reports – even for those placements which were less than successful – is the rapid development of self-confidence, the development of independence and self-reliance. These Soft Skills are categorised by Newman (2014) as emotional intelligence competencies.

Such experiences are reported in “Tracing The Impact Of Work Placements On Vocational Learners: Ireland National Report” (Leargas, 2021) which identifies Soft Skills as those skills most universally developed from the intercultural placement experience (p. 50). Self-confidence, communications, self-reliance, and personal effectiveness are all reported as enhanced. The key finding for teachers involved in exchange of good practice projects with their equivalent in other similar institutions in other countries, relates to enhanced professional confidence and leadership ability gained from the experience (McLaughlin, 2018).

FET is chosen as the education/training system for this current study because of its engagement with the European Programmes and the broad recognition of the transformational value of these experiences for the learners. FET has well-established relationships with employers, works to identify skill needs in collaboration with industry and is currently undergoing significant reform with a goal, at European level, to become an alternative, credible choice to Tertiary education. As of July 2023, steps have been taken to move toward this reality in the provision of twenty-three degree courses which are outside the CAO points requirements to open up new pathways to tertiary education and forge closer links between FET colleges and Universities (Higher Education Authority, 2023).

This area of study is cross-disciplinary incorporating the fields of education (FET), psychology/neuroscience (Soft Skills), and Business (Future of Work) (see Figure 2.1 below). Therefore, a number of theoretical lenses inform the research. The educational theorist, Vygotsky (1978), underpins the social aspects of education. Elsewhere, Freire (1970) is a key theorist whose work on critical pedagogy influences the philosophy and values base of community and adult education.

From a Business context perspective, the Socio-Technical Theory, which underpins the transition from Industry 4.0 to Industry 5.0, highlighted the change in human-machine interaction. Human Capital Theory is also relevant, highlighting the need for investment in human capital as a production factor and investment in human resource as an asset forming part of the market value of the company (Kucharcikova, 2011).

Finally, from a psychological perspective, the principles of Emotional Intelligence and Social and Emotional Learning are relevant via the works of Salovey and Mayer (1997), Newman (2014), and Goleman (2020).

1.7 Significance of the Research

This exploratory study aims to provide valuable insights into the need for Soft Skills, to unravel some of the confusion and thematic dispersion that attaches to the area of Soft Skills and identifying priority Soft Skills. The outcomes of this study may act as a guide to educators and employers in prioritising relevant Soft Skills development initiatives.

The key contributions to the field of study will be to:

- provide clarity and consensus on identification of priority Soft Skills for the future of work;
- outline the positive contribution of enhanced Soft Skills to the employee;
- offer a holistic definition of Soft Skills deriving from the data;
- align perspective regarding Soft Skills between employers, FET providers and new employees;
- sharpen the focus on the delivery of Soft Skills for learners within FET;
- recommend teaching strategies to support Soft Skills education and training.

Future study would benefit from a focus on the development of a Soft Skills Competency Framework based on identified priority Soft Skills needs and linked to the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

1.8 Structure of the Thesis

Chapter 1: Setting the Scene - Introduction to the research, to the researcher and the context, research questions, and drivers for this research.

Chapter 2: Context of Future World of Work provides an overview of the lead up to and post Covid reality in the world of work. It addresses, in part, the issues emerging for employers and employees as they learn from remote and blended working environments and navigate substantive social and economic change. It maps the arc of industrial development since the 1700's, highlighting the characteristics and priorities of the current industrial cycle.

Chapter 3: Literature Review examines the academic literature in relation to the research question - *What are the priority Soft Skills for the future of work?* The research framework was informed by adult learning, psychological and business theories. Literature related to the features and characteristics of the development of Soft Skills was considered and the relationship between Soft Skills, emotional intelligence, and values explored.

Chapter 4: Methodology outlines the research process, further evaluates the research question,

identifies the research methodologies and methods that underpin the data collection, analysis and reporting of results.

Chapter 5: Findings provides a presentation of the research findings based on qualitative, thematic analysis of the data.

Chapter 6 Discussion provides a further insight on the findings, revisiting the themes and triangulating findings across data and literature review.

Chapter 7: Conclusions and Recommendations presents the conclusions and discussed implications for education and business policy and practice. The limitations of the work are outlined, and areas identified for future research that emerged from this research are suggested.

Chapter 2: Context

This chapter describes the context of this study and the research focus on identifying the priority of Soft Skills for the workplace during and after the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic. Given the profound and transformative impact of the pandemic and the need to clearly establish the backdrop to this study, this chapter is divided into three sections: 1) The socio-political and economic context; 2) The Future of work context, and 3) The Education context.

The first section addresses the socio-political and economic context of the pandemic. It examines the impact of the pandemic on Globalisation and the rise of a values-driven approach to business. It explores the transition from Industry 4.0 (I4.0) to Industry 5.0 (I5.0), with its sharper focus on purpose and meaning and a greater symbiosis between human and machine.

The second section addresses the context of the Future of Work and explores the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the workplace. It addresses new models of work for the 'next normal' (Sneader and Singhal, 2020, p. 2), as well as the structural and social implications for the workplace. This is viewed through the lenses of employee wellbeing and the multi-generational workplace profile, post Covid.

The third section addresses the Educational context in Ireland, specifically the Further Education and Training System, as a platform for the provision and development of Soft Skills education. As highlighted in the introduction, FET has been selected as part of this study because of the significant reform outlined in the new strategy (2020-2024) which positions FET as an inclusive, education and training opportunity for everyone.

2.1 Socio-political and Economic Context.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact worldwide, forcing individuals, organisations, and governments to adapt and respond quickly to the rapidly changing circumstances. It was described by the CEO of a leading Irish professional services firm in a media interview in 2020, as an international economic crisis wrapped up in a global health threat. Fair (2022) describes the pandemic as a transboundary crisis (p. 1), that is, a crisis of such proportion that it impacts all elements of the social system and described by the World Economic Forum (WEF) as a systemic shock bringing with it an almost existential threat (WEF, 2020).

The impact of Covid-19 brought numerous risks that were divided by the World Economic Forum

(WEF, 2022) into five distinct areas: societal, environmental, economic, technological, and geopolitical. The highest rated of these risks continues to be the economic risk from a prolonged global recession. Other potential risks cascading from this economic downturn include industries failing to recover and potential failure of education and training to adapt to an extended crisis (WEF, 2022). Agrawal et al. (2020) identifies that the economic and social psychological impact of Covid-19 is due to rising unemployment and increased evidence of mental health issues; separate moderating factors such as race, age, gender, and culture suggest that these cohorts are likely to experience disparate Covid-19 impacts (Agrawal et al., 2020).

According to Atik et al. (2023), the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted the geopolitical and sociocultural global systems. Goldberg and Reed (2023) examine the impact of Covid 19 and more recent geopolitical risk of the Russo-Ukraine conflict on globalisation and global trade flows. They have found that, since the 2008 financial crisis, data indicates a slow-down but not reversal of global trade. They identify a sharp increase in global movement of goods in 2021. The future of globalisation according to the authors is highly uncertain and there is a need to drive resilience within economic policy as a future protective factor.

While technological advancement continues to be a driving socio-economic force during the pandemic, the impact of technological advancement pre-dates the pandemic. Technological change had already started to impact jobs prior to the onset of Covid-19. The impact of the pandemic combined with transformative technological development has shaped the nature and pace of change across multiple sectors. In their literature review, Atik et al. (2023) examine the future prospects associated with politico-cultural, social and techno-economic trends. They offer a conceptual analysis that identifies the techno-economic trends as moving in 'ameliorative directions' while the socio-political-cultural trends are moving in 'harmful directions, in terms of social justice and equitable development' (p.1).

The authors highlight a need for caution and balance in the absorption of technological progression, by recognising on the one hand, the positive effects of technology for workers and consumers, particularly in the areas of communications, medicine and biotechnology, while on the other hand, acknowledging the downside of technological progression as creating the potential for dissemination of *misinformation* thereby generating isolation and inequity. They assert that it is incumbent on policymakers and businesses to enhance the positive benefits of technology development and moderate the more harmful effects in order to 'alleviate poverty and reduce inequity-worsening tendencies unleashed by the pandemic' (Atik et al., 2023, p. 1).

2.1.1 Globalisation

The last three decades have witnessed the deepening of the globalisation process; this has been reflected by the increase in economic and financial interdependencies, the escalation of activities conducted by international economic organisations, and the expansion of off-shore companies. Globalisation has given rise to a context which is less dependent on physical location; where production is located on the basis of efficiency and can operate across borders with widely dispersed infrastructure. This has resulted in a heavily competitive environment (Gopinath and Parker, 2019). Goldberg and Reed (2023) described the pandemic as 'plausibly the largest shock the global economy has faced since World War II. It represented both a demand and a supply shock, as unemployment rose and income dropped sharply during lockdowns, while at the same time, production and commerce ceased in many countries' (p. 20). They highlight the indiscriminate impact on all sectors of the economy, with some sectors suffering more than others and the impact experienced at different times because infection waves were not synchronised across nations and continents. Goldberg and Reed (2023) also highlight that supply chain interruptions, shortages and delivery delays were problematic, even life-threatening, in some sectors for example, food and medical supplies, while other areas of the global market carried fewer negative consequences.

In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, different situations can have a short-, medium- or longer-term impact on the dynamic of globalisation, resulting in a scaling up the deployment of protectionist policies, regionalisation and relocation, all aimed at reducing the dependency upon foreign providers and protecting economic sovereignty and security. This has prompted the question of whether the pandemic has caused deglobalisation in line with this more inward looking economic practice. Previous economic crises have failed to reverse the globalisation process and, while the process of de-globalization is not new, Szeles and Saman (2020) assert that it has been reactivated, as a consequence of the protectionist measures adopted by several governments in the early stages of the crisis (Szeles and Saman, 2020).

Yeo (2019) characterises globalisation from a strategy perspective via the use of the acronym VUCA – *Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous*. VUCA has been used for the last few decades to describe the environment into which business operates. The term VUCA is attributed to the US Military (Barber, 1992; Saleh and Watson, 2017), as they coined the term to describe the frequent changes and dynamic nature associated with the conditions of war. However, in a business context, the term VUCA has become synonymous with turbulence of modern business and the leadership challenges that ensue (Johansen, 2007). The VUCA environment requires people to be agile in their response to unstable change; be diligent and thorough in the

information gathering to offset any uncertainty; leverage their information networks to be ready for unanticipated consequences of actions; and, finally, be ready to experiment in the face of ambiguity (Yeo, 2019). In the past twenty years, the world has experienced several major crises that have contributed to VUCA conditions, such as the September 11th terrorist attacks in 2001 in the US, the global financial crisis in 2008, the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, and more recently, the Russo/Ukrainian conflict of 2022, leading to the current environment being described as *'living in a world of chaos'* (Cascio, 2020). Taskan, Silva and Caetano (2022), in their systematic review of VUCA articles, highlight some lack of clarity and some overlap in the definitions of each of the VUCA elements.

Cascio (2020) suggested that the term VUCA is now no longer adequate given the chaos of the modern world, proposing instead to describe the current state as Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, and Incomprehensible (BANI). "Brittle" references an illusion of strength, in which systems appear strong until they are stress tested, and then they fail. "Anxious" describes a state where every choice is evaluated as having a potential negative impact, resulting in decision paralysis. "Nonlinear", relates to the fragmented and disconnected relationship between cause and effect, and "Incomprehensible," highlights the degree to which proposed explanations of unusual events seem illogical. Cascio (2020) argued that new approaches must be devised to address future risks and opportunities for transformation in an increasingly complex environment. The systemic stability of the pre-Covid period is no longer a given across sectors or regions of the world (Sorger, 2022). Zakarov (2022) argues that VUCA and BANI are more a reaction to events that occur at specific time periods than actual solutions in themselves.

Santana and Cobo (2020) undertook a science mapping analysis to create a structure for research into the 'Future of Work' and provide a classification of the most prolific themes identified within their bibliographic analysis. They offer clarity on the essence of the Future of Work across four key areas: technological, social, economic, and political.

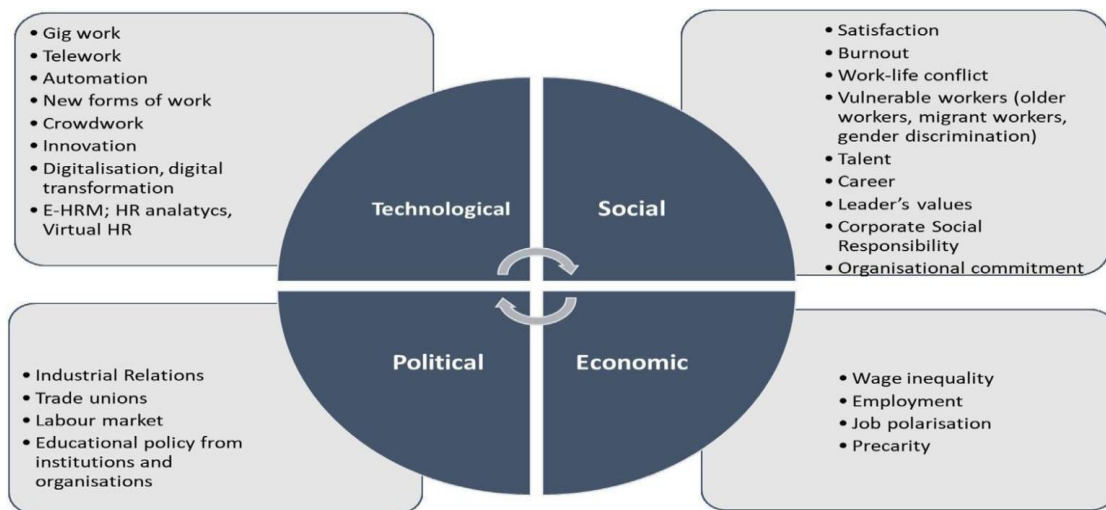


Figure 2.1: Future of Work (Santana and Cobo, 2020)

2.1.2 Technology Transformation

McKinsey (2020) identified the Covid Pandemic as an accelerant to economic and societal changes as a result of globalisation, the knowledge economy and the integration of technology into everyday life. The pandemic accelerated change to such an extent that the organisational shifts were more profound than any other time during the last century (Skillnet, 2022). As highlighted in Chapter 1, March to September 2020 represented the equivalent of a decade of accelerated progress in terms of digitisation and work practice.

Amankwah-Amoah et al. (2021) examined both the driving and constraining factors of Covid-19 on the digitisation of businesses around the world. They identify the pandemic as the 'Great Accelerator' or 'catalyst' for the adoption of new technology and increased digitalisation in the organisation and delivery of work. They further highlight the feedback loop, both positive and negative, arising from unforeseen challenges, opportunity, and cost.

According to Medynska et al. (2022), the digital economy contributes 15.5% to global GDP but is neither equal nor uniform in its impact across regions and sectors. At the macro-level, the influence of digitalisation is visible in innovation ecosystems and in the competitive dynamics of global information infrastructures. Recent thinking at the meso-level indicates that digital disruptions have influenced how organisations have restructured their capabilities and processes (Appio et al., 2021). The micro-level focuses on the individual and how digital transformation has changed life and work (Verhoef et al., 2021).

The nature and prevalence of discourse on the digital economy suggests a change in socioeconomic values. These value shifts align with the emergence of a new vision of the digital world as a key resource for governments, businesses, and individuals, where economic and social value can be created equitably for the benefit of society as a whole (Harvey et al., 2021; Marshall et al., 2020; Ranchordás, 2020).

Kolade and Owoseni (2022) investigated the division of labour between human and machine deriving from digital innovation, identifying far-reaching impacts of digital transformation on the future of employment. While acknowledging both the dramatic impact and the positive opportunity that result from technological transformation, they highlighted three possibilities for the future of work: a) mass unemployment resulting from technological substitution; b) polarisation of the job market and c) mass employment in the 'digital future' (p.2), supported by upgraded education initiatives and systems. These impacts are captured in terms of the different ways in which technological innovations have shaped the relationship between humans and machines.

Ratten (2020) highlighted the irrevocable change to business resulting from Covid-19, and the intensified need for the acquisition of critical skills to maintain competitive advantage. However, like many other issues, this focus on new skills and capabilities in readiness for the volatility and uncertainty characterised by the VUCA environment, pre-dates Covid (Mondoveanu and Narauyandas, 2019). Indeed, Feld et al. (2020) contend that shifts in technological capability, consumer preferences, and business models have been affecting the global workforce for a decade before the pandemic.

Several social, as well as technological, disruptors have been identified which characterise and contribute to the impact of Covid and the consequent impact on the workplace. These include:

- The pervasiveness of technology (IFF, 2010);
- The One-hundred Year life (Gratton, 2016);
- The explosion of contingency work – the Gig Economy (Santana and Cobo, 2020);
- The multigenerational workplace and diversity (Collins, 2011);
- The emergence of Artificial Intelligence (Ghislieri, Molino and Cirtese, 2018);
- The elimination of jobs vulnerable to technological advancement (Ghislieri, Molino and Cortese, 2018).

Countries and organisations are now beginning their evolution from initial reactive surprise at the scope and depth of the crisis to strategies for recovery and potential opportunities for change.

The McKinsey Institute, which tracks global economic trends, suggests that COVID-19 has advanced the conversation about the future of work (Lund et al., 2020), accentuating the need for a long-term perspective that, not only rebuilds from prior models, but develops strategies that create resilience for future crises.

Although proposals relating to remote working pre-date COVID-19, the pandemic has demonstrated that productivity and efficiency can be achieved via a remote work model and prove cost effective and safer than travelling to other parts of the country or world (Friedman 2020). The increasing blend of work and technology inevitably includes automation, as organisations look for ways to remain competitive and productive in the event of a future pandemic. Indeed, a renewed push to automate will have short and long-term ramifications for the future of work and the economic security of workers (Mercer, 2022).

2.1.3 Industry 5.0

The nature and prevalence of discourse on the digital economy suggests a change in socioeconomic values. These value shifts align with the emergence of a new vision of the digital world as a key resource for governments, businesses, and individuals, where economic and social value can be created equitably for the benefit of society as a whole (Harvey et al., 2021; Marshall et al., 2020; Ranchordás, 2020).

Klaus Schwab, Director of the WEF (2020) contends that the pandemic represents an opportunity to redesign the future. Rapid change, enabled by technological advances that are commensurate with those of previous pivotal moments in history, is causing a rethink on how organisations create value and how people interface with Artificial Intelligence (AI) now and into the future (Ghislieri, Molino and Cortese, 2018). Schwab and Davis (2019) suggest that previous industrial revolutions liberated humans from the limits and constraints of their times and enabled the availability of digital tools to the masses. The WEF identifies this current period of human evolution as the Fourth Industrial Revolution. This period represents a fundamental change to the way people live and work, as the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) is characterised by new technology that fuse previously separate arenas of physical, digital, and biological worlds (Harimi, 2020). Industry 4.0 is built on the foundation of key technological advances: Robotics; Simulation and Systems Integration; The Internet of Things; Cybersecurity; Augmented Reality (AR), and Big Data (Rübmann et al., 2015). Industry 4.0 can be viewed as a subset of 4IR, as it relates specifically to industry, while the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) has a broader interpretation to include political, social, and economic worlds (Philbeck and Davis, 2019).

Two years into the pandemic, McKinsey (2022) identified another step change in the macro-

context evolution in the form of Industry 5.0. Covid 19 was the accelerant for the emergence of Industry 5.0, which, while aligned with the continuing impact of Industry 4.0, is characterised by the values of Purpose, Meaning and Inclusion. To succeed in this context, companies need to foster innovation, build connections across distributed teams, develop growth mindset, and work to build consciousness and psychological safety (Dweck, 2016; McKinsey, 2020).

Socio-technical theory underpins the transition from I4.0 to I5.0 and, as identified by Fair (2022), emphasises the wider social value of the evolving role of business in addressing the need to promote ‘societal goals such as prosperity, resilience, environmental sustainability, inclusion, equality and mental and physical health and wellbeing’(p.1). It identifies I4.0 as a period of excessive technological determinism that will be moderated toward greater human-technology symbiosis in I5.0.

Carayannis and Morawska-Jancelewicz (2022) introduce the concept of Society 5.0 and Industry 5.0 as more than just a chronological continuation or alternative to the Industry 4.0 paradigm. Society 5.0, they contend, aims to place human beings at the centre of innovation, exploiting the outcomes of Industry 4.0 with the technological integration to improve quality of life, social responsibility, and sustainability.

The European Commission has applied Socio-technical Theory to I5.0 through a specific focus on ‘sustainable, human- centric and resilient’ industry, as outlined in Figure 2.2 below (Fair, 2022).



Figure 2.2: Pillars of Industry 5.0: Fair (2022)

Fair (2022) asserts that I5.0 design and development processes need to be inclusive of all stakeholders in the creation and co-creation of next generation solutions. Furthermore, it must include all social and technical aspects equally if I5.0 is to foster a more accurate calculation of ROI, and a general mindset shift from profit to prosperity going forward.

Cohen (2021), in the book, *IMPACT*, supports this argument identifying that business models will have to change to survive in what he calls the Impact Revolution; organisations with a strong sustainability strategy and corporate social values will attract inward investment and retain new entrants into the workplace. The Great Reset (WEF, 2020) further echoes the values-driven approach to the future of work, in that it represents an opportunity to deliver a better capitalism and better world and requires global stakeholders to cooperate in managing simultaneously the direct consequences from Covid 19 and starting the Great Reset Initiative. Stakeholder capitalism has a framework, which is defined as a 'set of dimensions to build a new social contract that honours the dignity of every human being' (WEF, 2020). The Great Reset identifies four founding principles of the new world, which are: Sustainability, Inclusive opportunity, Financial Responsibility, and Social Responsibility (WEF, 2020).

2.2 The Future of Work

As the world slowly emerges from the impact of the pandemic, focus is on reorganising the way work is carried out. Businesses must be alert to the changing environment and ensure their workforce planning is aligned to future skills needs. This has significant implications for Human Resources, which will need to focus on delivering a workforce strategy for sustaining business goals and should involve collaborating with upper management and leadership and educational institutions to address lifelong learning and skill requirements. Areas which are garnering attention include: employee support, new technology, and new and relevant models of leadership. HR3.0, which showed a paradigm shift within HR away from the traditional administrative roles toward a strategic, future-proofing role for the business, can be achieved with support (Wright et al., 2019).

The European Commission estimates 40% of EU jobs are at risk of transformation in the near-future world of work. The Expert group on Future Skills Needs – Digital Transformation reports 33% of jobs in Ireland are at risk of obsolescence or augmentation. The sectors most at risk are transportation, hospitality, manufacturing, retail, and agriculture (EGFSN, 2018). Mid-level roles declined by 11% internationally in OECD countries between 1990 and 2016, but there was a growth in high-skilled and low-skilled jobs. It is this middle layer where automation is expected to have the most immediate impact. Job-polarisation, as a trend, is likely to continue and is

characteristic of greater precarity as the stability of a job for life recedes. Indeed, new job characteristics will include short-term contracts, low wages, and variable hours which will have a social impact over time. This is accompanied by the rise of the gig economy (OECD, 2019).

McKinsey Global Institute (2018) identifies consequences to the global workforce, due to increased digitalisation, automation, and advances in artificial intelligence. As much as 14% of the global workforce may need to switch occupational categories by the year 2030. This will require an increase in public spending which does not appear to have materialised in OECD countries as of yet.

2.2.1 The Next Normal

The *next normal* differentiates the periods pre and post pandemic, where the next new normal relates to the period post pandemic and is characterised by shifts in roles and responsibilities in the workplace due to the impact of remote working. It also refers to the transition in leadership required to ensure capabilities and skills will enable future survival of the business in this new era (Sneader and Singhal, 2020). Currently, there is a strong emphasis across the literature on building skills and capabilities- social and emotional skills, ones not likely to be impacted by A.I. (Black and Van Esch, 2020). In fact, Kosslyn (2019) highlights the importance of strengthening uniquely human skills, a point which was echoed by LinkedIn in their 2020 report highlighting that almost all Learning and Development executives hold the opinion that, should these critical skills be left unaddressed, innovation and business growth would be negatively impacted (FELD et al., 2020).

The Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) (OECD, 2019) states that the skills that workers will need to transition to a digital economy by necessity incorporates a broad mix of skills, including cognitive and socio-emotional skills. These skills are important because they enable people to both adapt to change within occupations and navigate between occupations. Furthermore, they serve to make the workforce resilient and mobile (OECD, 2019).

Adapting the skills and roles of employees to the post-Covid-19 way of work is crucial to operating-model resilience as current trends accelerate the requirement for skills enhancement (Agrawal et al., 2020). The Global Talent Trends Report (Mercer, 2022) identifies the learning for executives and employees following Covid-19, highlighting a shift in mindset. Indeed, it identifies the workforce as more adaptable and that HR functions are favouring in-house development processes of '*build*' over '*buy*' strategies to address critical skills gaps (Mercer, 2022, p.8).

In light of the above, Agrawal et al. (2020) suggest there are 6 steps for companies to assist their

employees to reskill:

- Quickly identify the skills your business recovery depends on;
- Build those skills critical to the business model;
- Launch tailored learning programmes to address skills gaps;
- Start immediately, test early and reiterate;
- Act like a small company to have a big impact;
- Protect learning budgets (Agrawal et al., 2020, p. 4).

Kolade and Owoseni (2022) highlight the impacts of digital transformation at individual, corporate, and societal levels. At the individual and corporate levels, the pace of digital transformation has accentuated the increasing importance of the knowledge worker as innovators and conduits of tacit knowledge transfer within organisations. They also raise new questions about worker autonomy and precarity.

The importance of digital upskilling and reskilling of employees has emerged in recent research to mitigate the negative impact of Covid (Verma and Gustafsson, 2020). Reskilling for the digital economy is a priority because the digital skills shortage is slowing down the green transition and future economic growth. The challenge in the context of this paradigm shift is for the employer to create conditions to enable flexibility for the employee, support rapid adjustment to emerging new technology at pace and to foster an altro-centric leadership approach to support lifelong learning (WEF, 2022).

2.2.2 Contingency Work

Greater use of contingency workers, also known collectively as the 'Gig Economy' is a characteristic of the 'Future of Work' environment. Mahato, Kumar and Jena (2021) highlighted that, post covid- 19, a traditional workforce would no longer be the norm; instead, a blended workforce would emerge where full time employees would work in tandem with contractors via an online platform to bridge any short-term skills gap. This '*Gig Economy*' will eliminate, to varying degrees, the need for companies to carry the overhead of permanent staff. Mahato, Kumar and Jena (2021) suggest that the implications for management operating a blended or hybrid workforce are as follows:

Implications for management of a blended workforce

- 1 Maintain collaboration through support for social inclusivity.
- 2 Drive employee performance through employee performance management

- systems which analyses individual contribution and business value.
- 3 Transformation of learning and development through management simulation games
 - 4 Managers need to recognise the contribution of the blended team to organisational society.
 - 5 Address career planning to reduce the boundaries between full time and gig employees.

(Mahato, Kumar and Jena, 2021, p.272).

2.2.3 The Rise of the Social Enterprise

The WEF White Paper (2022) has identified that the uncertain global economy and underinvestment in social infrastructure means that inequality is growing. The social enterprise is defined as 'an organisation whose mission combines revenue growth and profit-making with the need to respect and support its environment and stakeholder network'. The WEF (2020) sees purpose and ethics as central agenda items and several hundred of the world's biggest companies supported this redefinition of purpose to one of service to society at large. According to the Deloitte Human Capital Report (2020), there is a continuing shift in individual empowerment and advocacy within employee-employer relationships and is coupled with technology as the primary driver (p. 10). Every company is now a technology company according to the authors but thus far the human focus and the technological focus have run in parallel. However, there are emerging important questions to be asked which form, what Deloitte calls, the central paradox, which is the title of this report, 'Can organisations remain distinctly human in a technology-driven world?' (Deloitte, 2020).

Three business practice priorities were identified to address this question: fostering belonging while honouring the desire for individuality: connecting employees through purpose and creating community and belonging will be critical; creating stability in a changing world: this will be achieved through reinvention. Results identified that 53% of the workforce will need to upskill and reskill by 2024 and taking bold action in an age of uncertainty: 90% of respondents indicated that the accelerating need for organisations to change at scale and speed was imperative to success going forward but only 55% felt that these same organisations were change ready (Deloitte, 2020).

Many of the practical solutions offered in the Human Capital report relate to *belonging to connection to contribution*; designing for well-being to enhance performance; shifting approach to better understand the needs of a multigenerational workplace and investing in resilience for an

uncertain future (Deloitte, 2020).

2.2.4 Characteristics of the Future Workplace:

Gartner (2020) anticipated, with some accuracy, the impact Covid would have on trends towards working from home (WFH) post the immediate fallout of the pandemic, with the contention that alternative and blended modes of work would need some consideration and research. Chafi et al. (2021) support the need for studies on remote and blended work models from an occupational health and wellbeing perspective and by identifying the needs and challenges, highlighting the potential for a sustainable future work environment.

2.2.5 The Multigenerational Workforce

In the digital transformation context, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, younger and older generational workers coexist within organisations. The ageing workforce has significant implications for human resource management, organisations and societies (Ciutienė and Railaitė, 2014; Hertel and Zacher, 2018). Different generational groups may experience this new organisational landscape differently and may expect different organisational outcomes in exchange for their contribution to work. Accordingly, the study investigated differences regarding the value-oriented psychological contract expectations of different generational groups. In addressing the future of work landscape, Collings and McMackin (2019) suggest that organisations will likely see five 'generations' active in some workplaces, each with their different needs and world view which will put pressure on HR departments and professionals to create an environment that works for all. Generational differences in the workplace relate to attitudes, beliefs, and values about life and work. The authors also found that only 30% of organisations were confident about meeting their future skills needs. This changing workplace profile will demand a critical and more strategic role of HRM to adapt to the diversity of the multigenerational workforce (Ince, 2022).

In reverse chronological order, the generations are as follows:

- Generation Z: born after 1996
- Millennials: born between 1981 and 1995
- Generation X: born between 1965 and 1980
- Baby Boomers: born between 1946 and 1964
- Silent Generation: born between 1925 and 1945

However, in an editorial from the *Journal of Vocational Behaviour* (2020), researchers were

encouraged to eschew the generations classification when considering the impact of Covid-19 on career development and to consider other lifespan development theories as an alternative, on the basis that there is little empirical evidence to support the generational classifications. The editorial cites Rudolph and Zacher (2020) who posit that the assumed differences are more likely socially constructed and view the generational theory as a '*vastly oversimplified framework for understanding vocational behaviour*' (p. 2).

2.2.6 Challenges for New Models of Work

Chan et al. (2022) reviewed all the work-life literature since the onset of the pandemic to identify the long-term impact of changed work models and mitigate any negative impacts on work-life experience. Their research yielded three key considerations that call for an employer response. Key findings relate to the blurring of work-life boundaries and the identification of behaviour-based and time-based work-life conflict emerging, as well as technical overload relating to work and intensified psychological and emotional work demands.

Bhave, Teo and Dalal (2020) identify the potential issues of management control likely to emerge as the out of sight/out of reach may lead to new modes of surveillance. Early adopters of WFH are said to be developing sociometric sensor technologies to monitor employees. This is supported by the Gartner Future of Work Trends Post-Covid report (2022) which confirms a 16% increase in passive employee data collection, focusing on:

- Logging on/out;
- Internal communication/chat/email;
- Location/movement;
- Computer/phone use.

Mercer (2022) also highlights that knowledge accruing to managers and leaders resulting from the pandemic has brought an awareness of a reset around work, the workforce, and how work is delivered. Other areas highlighted as important for managers and employees related to the priority of delivering wellbeing programmes that had retention metrics attached to them. A third area highlighted was that companies should understand the range of skills that enabled greater agility.

Areas highlighted in the report from its 11,000 respondents include:

- Reset for Relevance – attract and retain talent by reflecting their values (p.7);
- Work in Partnership – foster a partnership mindset (p.26);

- Build for employability – secure the future with skills (p.56);
- Harness Collective Energy – design human centric work experience and a relatable people function (p.72).

2.2.7 Workplace Context and Consequences for People: Wellbeing

Wellbeing

The World Health Organisation defines the consequences of declining mental health as causing absenteeism, presenteeism, and costing approximately one-trillion dollars in lost productivity annually (WHO, 2022). The reality of working from home, coupled with social distancing, results in the absence of social connections and networks, which, in turn, can diminish mental health (Mogilier, Whillans and Norton, 2018). Isolation and loneliness within the Gen Y and Gen Z cohorts is increasing. The Lancet, (2020) reports that even a period of as little as 10 days can produce a negative and lasting impact on mental health. Indeed, loneliness has a direct and negative impact on an employee's affective commitment, affiliative behaviours, and performance. According to Schroeder et al. (2019), hugs and handshakes are actually important.

The Deloitte Human Capital Trends Report (2020) highlights the fact that wellbeing was on the organisational agenda and actually pre-dates Covid-19. However, the pandemic catapulted wellbeing in terms of its importance but additionally placed the risks associated with wellbeing under threat. In fact, 80% of the 9000 survey respondents identified wellbeing as important to organisational success (Deloitte, 2020); however, Gallup's State of the Global Workplace Report (2021) found that employees in the US saw their stress levels soar during the events of 2020, with burnout, especially in the context of remote work, being a particular risk. Indeed, Deloitte's Women@Work Report (2022) found that burnout and lack of flexibility were among the reasons that women would exit employment. The World Economic Forum (2022) suggests that getting women back into the workforce is a priority and that, even though women are more highly skilled than men, they are 20% underrepresented in the workforce.

Gallup (2021) references the protective factors for the development of resilience in a remote working environment. Almost 'burnout free' employees shared three common characteristics:

- 1. They are engaged at work.** - Engaged employees are primed for success by having collaborative relationships and role clarity within the workplace.
- 2. They have high levels of wellbeing.** Work-life balance is being replaced with the concept of work-life integration. Employers can help employees make their work better fit their current life situation and adjust when challenges arise. Remote

workers need particular care; they have been most at risk for burnout throughout much of the pandemic. Increased frequency of check-ins and being mindful of the communication and collaboration challenges inherent to remote work are critical for good management practice.

- 3. An organisation culture that celebrates strength.** When an employee is doing what they do best, they are more likely to enter, what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls, a "state of flow." Here, time flies as they are immersed and engaged in their work. Focusing on strengths improves collaboration and reduces stress and fatigue (Gallup, 2021).

McHugh et al. (2021) identified a movement toward creating a culture of authenticity, belonging, and support. The move highlights the priority given to transparency and empathy. They identify particularly the need for employers to invest in holistic wellbeing programmes as a means of eliminating stigma and offer access to a end-to-end continuum of care which aims to equalise the importance of mental and physical health. The introduction of a Chief Wellness Officer role has also been shown to positively impact employee wellbeing, increase worker engagement, and decrease stress levels. This has also helped with collaboration between co-workers by supporting them to connect psychologically while continuing to work remotely (Laker and Roulet, 2021).

The work of Jane Dutton on Positive Organisational Scholarship has re-emerged and gained traction in the current context. Positive Organisational Scholarship (POS) is a broad framework that seeks to explain behaviours in and of organisations. It focuses on the positive states and processes that arise from high-quality relationships and the fostering of positive emotion in the workplace. This, in turn, results in optimal functioning, and enhanced capabilities or strengths, with the goal being to release the full range of employee potential and capabilities (Cameron et al., 2003).

A meta-analysis of over 70 studies (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002) showed that perceived organisational support was significantly related to positive employee mood. However, creating positive emotions in employees and co-workers should not be the end goal of POS. Indeed, Fredrickson (2003) asserts that 'people should consider cultivating positive emotions in themselves and others, not just as end-states in themselves, but also as a means to achieving individual and organisational transformation and optimal functioning over time' (p. 164).

Burnout

The pressure to address job burnout became so intense in 2019 that the World Health Organization (WHO) declared burnout an occupational phenomenon in its global standard for

diagnostic health information, the 11th revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD Code 273.0).

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines burnout as: 'A syndrome conceptualised as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed' (WHO, 2019). Although burnout is not considered a medical illness, it is grouped with other factors that may result in a medical consultation. Neither is it recognised by the American Psychological Association as a diagnosis in the DSM of mental disorders. Just the same, burnout is now a serious and prevalent occurrence (WHO, 2019) which negatively impacts performance and reduces confidence, with those experiencing burnout three times more likely to leave their jobs (Nortje, 2021).

A Gallup survey (2020) asked how often participants experienced workplace burnout: 48% answered sometimes and 21% responded always.

Despite business efficiency growing significantly during 2020, mental health of employees has significantly declined with an increase in stress levels, anxiety, and depression. According to McKinzie (2021), 42% of employees globally have reported a decline in mental health. In addition to this, a burnout survey of c. 1000 US employees (Visier, 2021), identifies that burnout disproportionately impacts younger, female employees. Here, 89% of respondents reported experiencing burnout over the previous 12 months and 70% indicated that they would leave their workplace in favour of one offering resources and support against burnout.

SHU et al. (2022) conducted a study on the relationship between work demands and home-life conflict with two groups - those in-office and those working from home. Their findings showed that increased workload seems to contribute to work engagement for employees who worked from home. The three different sources of social support – leaders, coworkers, and family – were all related to employee wellbeing, but in different ways. It seemed that family support was most important for employees' wellbeing in the cohort working from home, thus highlighting the need for organisations to develop family-friendly policies.

However, despite the significant challenges to well-being posed by the reality of remote working, the WEF (2020) report also highlights that approximately 33% of all employers are committed to creating a sense of community, connection, and belonging among employees to combat this. Winter et al. (2022) assert that increasing empathy levels has been proven to improve job satisfaction and enhance protection from burnout. Indeed, overall wellbeing and strong interpersonal relationships are connected to high levels of empathy (Xu et al., 2022).

2.3 The Education Context

Further Education and Training (FET)

SOLAS, established in 2013, works with the Minister of Education and Skills to define and agree national Further Education and Training (FET) system targets in order that FET learners have:

‘a better chance of a job; the opportunity to progress to other education and training; the transversal skills that will allow them to integrate and engage effectively with society; a means of accessing education throughout a lifetime; vocational skills that are linked to regional and national critical skills requirements; and new models of delivery which can meet their rapidly evolving needs’ (2020, p.24).

The Irish government created a new department in 2020 called the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS). DFHERIS now funds and creates policy for the higher and further education and research sectors with SOLAS under their remit. It also ‘makes sure that public investment and policy in these areas give opportunities to everyone, including the most vulnerable in society’ (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science, 2022).

2.3.1 Defining FET

DFHERIS defines Further Education as follows: ‘Further education covers education and training which happens after second-level schooling, but which is not part of the higher education system’ (DFHERIS, 2022). According to the SOLAS website: ‘SOLAS is the State agency tasked with building a world class Further Education and Training (FET) sector to fuel Ireland’s future’ (SOLAS, 2022). SOLAS, in conjunction with the sixteen Education and Training Boards, is responsible for the integration, coordination and funding of Further Education and Training provision in Ireland. The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act (1999) defines further education and training broadly as ‘education and training other than primary or post-primary education or higher education and training’ (Irish Statute Book, 2022).

Mc Guinness et al. (2014) state that the five key areas of adult and training provision comprise initial vocational education and training including apprenticeships; a re-entry route to further education and training; professional or vocational development for those in or re-entering the workforce; community education and training; and other learning undertaken by adults, both formal and informal (p. viii). SOLAS in their initial strategy (2014-2019) for FET state that ‘Clearly, skills development and wellbeing lie at the heart of the FET Strategy. Employers lie at the heart of

skill needs, while the learner lies at the heart of the FET service' (2013, p.4).

2.3.2 Aims and Objectives of FET

SOLAS states that that main focus of the Strategy is to provide the following skills through FET: 'Skills as a resource for economic growth; Skills as drivers of employment growth; Skills as drivers of productivity increase; Skills and 'smartening' of the economy; Skills as a driver of social inclusion and social mobility; and Skills as an insulator from unemployment' (2013, pp.4- 5). The majority of publicly funded provision of education and training takes place through the Education and Training Boards on a regional basis through programmes and initiatives and a variety of settings (see Figure 2.3, below). As is pointed out in the most recent SOLAS FET Strategy, 'with the exception of statutory apprenticeships, the maximum length of a FET course is one year, although some provision carries a two-year option with a distinct award at the end of each year' (SOLAS, 2020, p.22).

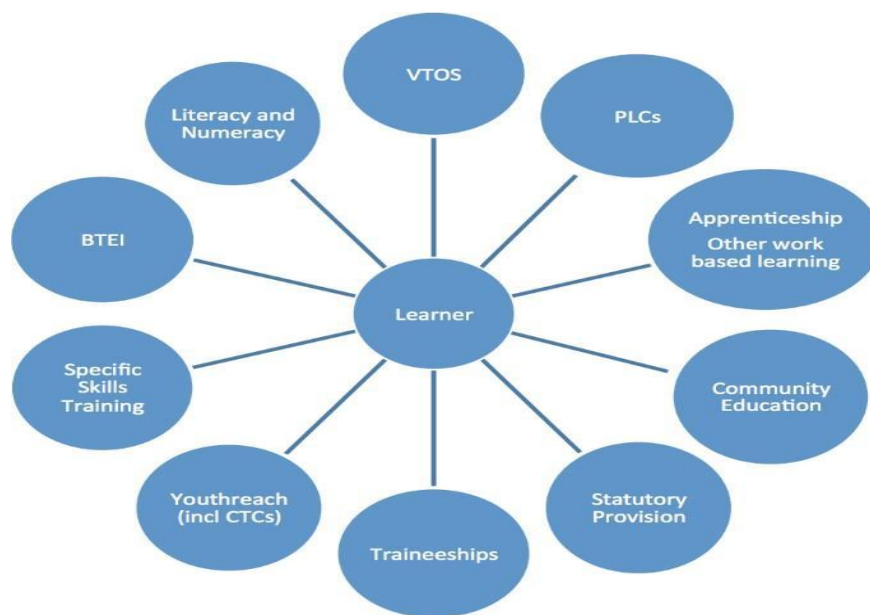


Figure 2.3: Main types of FET Provision (SOLAS, 2013, p.53)

The new FET strategy (2020-2024) for Ireland states that the world is being transformed by a series of megatrends: globalisation; digitalisation; ageing demographics and climate change. These megatrends are further impacted by the anticipated increase in the use of Big Data; Automation and Augmented Reality. Skills will need to evolve rapidly to enable people to navigate the employment landscape.

The strategy further highlights that ‘FET provides a continuum of learning opportunities from Level 1 to Level 6 of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), focused on both core and specific skills development, accompanied by a range of learner supports to facilitate the active inclusion of all citizens’ (SOLAS, 2020, p.21). SOLAS states that over 200,000 unique learners engage in FET each year and that the ‘vast majority of learners (100,000) are engaged in foundation skills (NFQ Levels 1-2) with 40,000 availing of ‘bridging skills’ and 60,000 focused on vocational skills (SOLAS, 2020, p.24).

The National Skills Strategy 2025 (2016) refers to transversal skills as the ‘building blocks for the development of the hard or vocational or technical skills required to succeed in the labour market’. The report states that the skills identified by enterprise include innovation, creativity, entrepreneurship, teamwork, communication and business acumen, and entrepreneurship (Department of Education and Skills, 2016, p.33). The Strategy also contends that ‘there is a rising demand for higher level cognitive and interpersonal skills. The skillsets of people in elementary occupations and those in higher skilled occupations will need to be developed in this constantly changing environment’ (2016, p.32).

In 2018, the government of Ireland set out a new policy framework “Supporting Working Lives and Enterprise Growth in Ireland” for employee development opportunities in Ireland as part of the annual Action Plan for Education. It included as a stated aim a vision of the workplace in Ireland where the ‘provision in further education and training which supports employee development is flexible, high quality, accessible and relevant to the changing needs of employees, the economy and industry’. In particular, one of the key drivers of this policy was the development of Soft Skills in the workplace (2018, p.6).

While FET has received some criticism for an over focus on technical skills, the new strategy points out that Soft Skills [Transversal Skills or Meta-Skills] are embedded across all levels of FET provision from Personal and Social Skills Development at Levels 1-4 to communications and work placement modules at level 6 (FET Strategy, 2020).

This provision is delivered through ‘64 FET centres focused primarily on either what was traditionally seen as training or further education at Level 5 or Level 6. There is a wider network of 293 community-based facilities providing critical access to education and training opportunities, primarily at Levels 1 to 4’ (ibid, p.22) (see Figure 2.4).

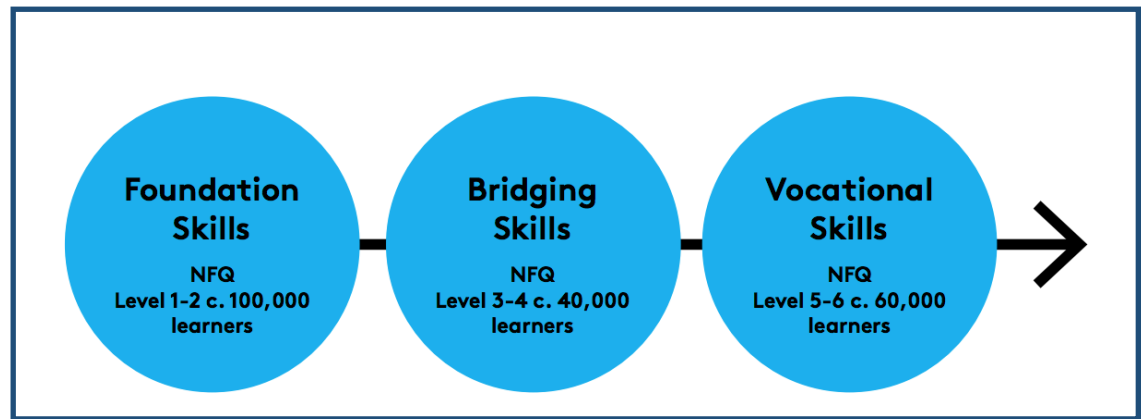


Figure 2.4: FET by broad type of provision (SOLAS, 2020, p.24)

2.3.3 FET Professional Development Strategy

The FET Professional Development Strategy defines FET practitioners as ‘anyone working in the sector who is involved in working directly with learners or in supporting or influencing the learner experience in FET’ (SOLAS and Education and Training Boards Ireland, 2017, p. 16). Rami and O’Kelly (2021) point out that ‘the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2019, p. 86) acknowledges that teachers in vocational education and training (VET) need to have not only theoretical and practical knowledge and relevant experience of the broad package of skills required for the profession they teach, but also knowledge of and experience in effective teaching for learners who often struggle with academic study’. The Teaching Council defines Further Education as ‘...education and training which usually occurs outside of post-primary schooling, but which is not part of the third-level system’ (Teaching Council, 2011, p. 2). Grummell and Murray (2015) emphasise that the ‘historic correlation of further education with the working classes and marginalised groups, and the lower level of status and recognition of further education relative to other education sectors has profound social justice consequences’ (p.435).

In terms of widening participation, SOLAS states that a ‘substantial number of learners at a national level were ‘lost’ particularly from priority cohorts such as: learners who self-declare a disability, learners from the Traveller and the Roma Communities, as well as migrants and asylum seekers’ during Covid. It has shown that this trend has reversed and the ‘national system target for widening participation for 2022 was 16,788, at the end of the year ETBs had collectively engaged with 18810 unique learners’ (SOLAS, 2020, p.15). In terms of the Strategic Performance

Agreements Driving FET Outcomes 2023, SOLAS (p.19) expects FET to be: 'Addressing the major decline in certification levels for transversal skills during COVID and increase these outcomes by over 10% from pre-pandemic levels'. The implication is that transversal skills are measured within a fostering inclusion approach in terms of life skills which tend to focus on levels 1 to 3.

Transversal skills are equally prioritised for those in employment and for work ongoing on a more integrated level 5 and 6 as per the SOLAS FET Strategy (2020) which proposes that 'a new Level 5 and 6 programme be developed to replace the confusing array of vocationally focused programmes in FET (Further Education and Training), with apprenticeships, traineeships, evening training, specific skills training and PLC's offered in two very distinct settings, namely training centres and FE Colleges' (Maunsell, 2023, p.1).

2.4 Conclusion

In summary, as the world emerges from the worst of Covid-19, the issues highlighted above are now a firm reality. The pandemic has accelerated changes in workplace dynamics which were already underway, for example, automation and AI. People development needs to focus on digital expertise and cognitive, emotional and adaptability skills. Many workplaces are offering blended work options and are adapting to the current business environment to remain competitive. While the desire for remote or blended work pre-dates Covid, the transition was rapid and has not been as smooth as expected. Wellbeing issues and employee connection remain at the centre of considerations.

FET is ideally placed to develop innovative teaching strategies to embed both Soft Skills (transversal in this context) and meta-skills into the new programmes under reform.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

The previous section outlined the context for the future of work, highlighting the seismic shift which has taken place during, and in the wake of, the Covid-19 pandemic. As was pointed out, many of the issues now being dealt with have their origins in developments which predated the pandemic – globalisation and flexible work models and technology transfer. Nonetheless, Covid acted as an accelerator, pushing companies, educators and employees to adapt. Chapter 3 presents the context of the research question and sub questions from the literature addressing Soft Skills needs and education provision at the intersection of three perspectives: that of the employer and skills needs for work; that of Further Education and Training setting – provision and practice; and that of the individual new-entrant/graduate to the workplace (see figure 3.1).

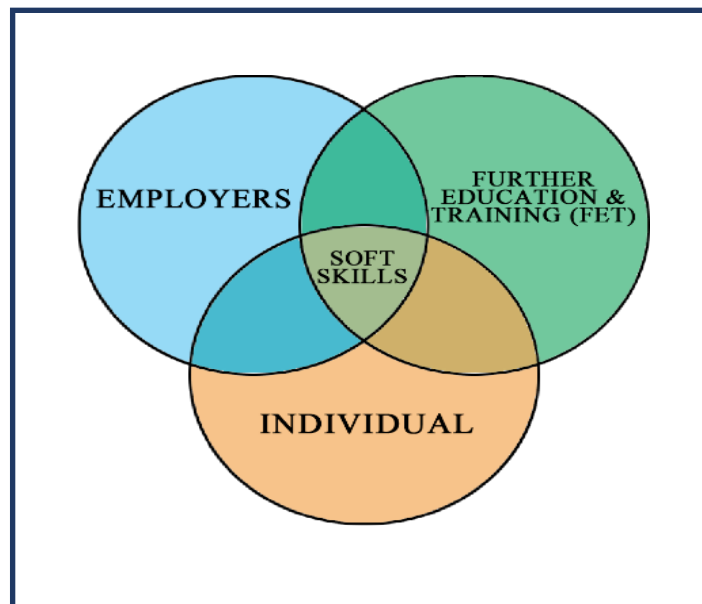


Figure 3.1: Intersecting perspectives on the importance of Soft Skills

Section One addresses the evolution of the Soft Skills conversation, as well as the myriad definitions and blurred nomenclature that surrounds the subject. It also highlights the importance of Soft Skills for the post pandemic world of work.

Section Two seeks out the identification of priority Soft Skills and reviews the literature to identify any skills gaps in the perceptions of employers. It also highlights differences of perspective between new employees (Generation Z) and employers and demonstrates the benefit and values

of these skills in navigating an uncertain future.

Section Three then reviews strategies and methods for teaching and learning of Soft Skills in FET.

Section 1

3.1 Evolution of Soft Skills

Across the literature, discourse on skills divides into hard and Soft Skills, with hard skills describing action-oriented, technical skills and Soft Skills applying to a broad range of socio- emotional skills (Heckman and Kautz, 2012). Over 100 years ago, Soft Skills were referenced in the work of Charles Mann (1918) on the necessity of Soft Skills training from college to workplace. He was specifically referring to engineering students. He asserted that ‘personal qualities such as common sense, integrity, resourcefulness, initiative, tact, thoroughness, accuracy, efficiency and understanding of men, should be recognised as equally important as technical skills and knowledge (Mann, 1918, p.107). Katz (1974) devised a skills classification related to this work on effective administration that is regarded as a precursor to the area of Soft Skills. It appears in most literature reviews pertaining to Soft Skills because of the skills classification he presents in his work on effective administration. As such, his work is largely regarded as precursor to the area of Soft Skills. He offered a tripartite skills categorisation as: technical, human, and conceptual, with Technical relating to task specific skills; Conceptual relating to analytical factors in decision-making; and Human related to cooperation with others, or, interpersonal skills. He suggested that technical and conceptual skills enjoyed different levels of priority at different stages of an employee’s career development, but noted that Human skills were deemed important at every level.

Boyzatis (1982) acknowledged the importance of Soft Skills in his work on identifying and creating a full listing of managerial competences. He concluded that Soft Skills competencies differentiated superior managers from poor managers. Stevens and Campion (1994, 1999) deconstructed teamwork into its component competencies to suggest a classification of Soft Skills which included: *Conflict Resolution; Collaborative Problem Solving; Communications; Goal Setting and Performance Management and Planning and Task Coordination*. Okeiyi, Finley and Postel (1994), in their study on Hospitality, identified Soft Skills as central competencies to the Hospitality sector. Sutton (2002) further contended that the importance of Soft Skills was such that they were ‘the number one differentiator’ for job applicants for employers across a range of sectors (p. 40). James and James (2004) found that Soft Skills constituted a broad range of talents and career attributes which include, team skills, communication, leadership, customer service, and problem-solving skills. Glenn (2008) also asserted that Soft Skills were instrumental for high-performing

organisations to retain competitive advantage.

Furthermore, Jackson (2012) listed 25 Soft Skills in an attempt to develop a complete listing but finds some blurring in definitions between those skills which are taught versus those with intrinsic personality orientation. In addition, Carol Dweck (2016) distinguishes between fixed and growth mindset, identifying growth mindset as particularly important to facilitate learning through the life cycle. Feraco et al. (2023) suggest that adaptability, perseverance, and curiosity are fundamental to the acquisition of Soft Skills.

3.1.1 Toward a definition of Soft Skills

There are multiple attempts at a definition of Soft Skills across the literature. Evers, Rush and Berdrow (1998) in their work *The bases of competence; lessons for Lifelong Learning* - define competence as the 'individual's capacity to perform i.e., the presence of knowledge, skills and personal characteristics needed to satisfy the special demands of the given situation'. Robles (2012) identifies Soft Skills as personality traits which differentiate the individual from others. In his work investigating fundamental skills for the work environment of 2012, Robles found that integrity, responsibility, interpersonal skills, and work ethic were among the 12 skills deemed most impactful and important. The 10 categories identified by Robles (2012) have multiple qualities subsumed within those skills. Heckman and Kautz (2012) concur that Soft Skills are personality traits and preferences valued in many domains, such as the workplace and school. Hurrell, Scholarios and Thompson (2013) define Soft Skills as: 'non-technical and not reliant on abstract reasoning involving interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities to facilitate mastered performance in a particular context'. Matsouka and Mihail (2016) highlight Soft Skills as the personal attributes which assist an individual in their job performance, career prospects and everyday interaction.

Matteson, Anderson, and Boyden (2016) assert that Soft Skills are important to a broad range of job positions but that the concept lacks definition; they attribute the lack of clarity to the absence of systematic education and training. They explore the definition of Soft Skills and contrast that with related concepts such as personality, attitudes, beliefs and values. Soft Skills is a cross-disciplinary area and appears in the literature of Management, Education, Business and Psychology. Matteson, Anderson and Boyden (2016) describe the treatment of the term as 'fuzzy and murky' (p. 71). They are described as non-technical, non-cognitive domain-independent skillsets that underpin behaviour in the workplace: 'Soft Skills connected with communications and interpersonal skills are essential [...] to be approachable, to listen to customers and show interest in their information needs' (Matteson Anderson and Boyden, 2016, p. 72). Marin-Zapata

et al. (2021) also support this view that Soft Skills suffer from confusion, in terms of definition resulting from theoretical dispersion and methodological inconsistency.

Matteson, Anderson and Boyden (2016) highlight that, while much of the constituent elements of training for information and communications professionals is classified under 'hard' skill i.e., research, classification and so on, much of the evaluation of performance within the role focuses on 'soft' skills. This brings the question that if the development of these skills is to be left to chance, opportunity or upbringing, then how is a service to reach its fullest potential? In the now established service economy, this question becomes even more relevant: 'The absence of clear definitions of taxonomies of discrete Soft Skills makes it challenging for the idea of Soft Skills to truly gain traction in research or in practice' (Boyatzis, Stubbs and Taylor, 2009, p. 80).

Among the various definitions of skills, the concept of execution is central to all of them. Evers, Rush and Berdrow (1998) suggest a competency continuum from low to high indicating a developmental journey in the acquisition of skills. Grugulis and Vincent (2009) warn against defining personal attributes and behaviours as skills. There are examples of motivation, traits, goals, preferences, and attitude; all having been included in descriptions of Soft Skills. They argue that these are personal attributes, not skills.

According to the World Economic Forum (2018), employers refer to Soft Skills as a catch-all for everything that's not considered to be core, technical, cognitive-ability related to a job. Those Soft Skills include a range of skills from creativity to collaboration to punctuality. The WEF (2019) refers to the importance of these skills as 'uniquely human capabilities' in reviewing the interface between humans and Artificial Intelligence. Overall, the authors identify a lack of cohesion in the definitions in the absence of no one agreed-upon set of Soft Skills or definition.

The OECD 'Future of Education and Skills 2030' (2019), FET Strategy 2020-2024 and National Skills Strategy 2025 reports all highlight the growing importance of Soft Skills in Education and training resulting from accelerated technological change, the emergence of AI and the global economy which are driving changes in work structures and consequently, skills needs. What's clear from this report is that readiness for the future of work is an iterative process which requires a level of organisational flexibility. While the focus is on the absence of Soft Skills, there is also evidence to show that, in Ireland, there is a mismatch between the skills that people have and the jobs that they are doing. According to FET statistics, 30% of people are in job roles for which they are over-skilled (Department of Education, 2017).

3.1.2 Nomenclature

There is considerable discussion across the literature on the inadequacy of the terminology of Soft Skills. Klein, DeRouin and Salas (2006) offer a possible application of a critical feminist approach to explore how Soft Skills could be gendered on personal, organisational and societal levels; they highlight hard versus soft as a binary concept – consciously or not - to relationships between masculinity and femininity. This is indirectly supported by Grugulis and Vincent (2009) where they assert that society as a whole devalues the feminine. Soft Skills are related to communication skills and identified with aspects of nurturing and Emotional Intelligence (EQ), both elements of which are viewed as inherently feminine (Grugulis and Vincent, 2012). They link Soft Skills with the general acknowledgement that women perform better in these skills areas at work but note that it does not contribute to corresponding increase in recognition. If Soft Skills are to have a central place in the future workplace, then awareness – of the gendered nature, of hard and soft nomenclature and consequent perception within the workforce – must be subject to thoughtful construct classification (Grugulis and Vincent, 2009). Matteson, Anderson and Boyden (2016) look at this area purely through the skills (as opposed to competency) lens, but there is little attempt to look beyond Soft Skills to more appropriate or inclusive nomenclature.

Shannon (2018) in her discourse analysis on EU FET policy documents - Learning for Life: The White Paper on Adult Education (DES, 2000) and the Further Education and Training Strategy (SOLAS, 2014) - analysed how the White Paper and the FET Strategy were framed by the EU policy discourses of 'lifelong learning' and 'skills' respectively. She tracked the linguistic move from the social and humanity discourse where Education is the edifying force for its own sake and fosters attributes such as respect, identity, tolerance, and empathy to one where Education becomes the servant to employment. Shannon (2018) further contends that the terminology around inclusion is migrating to 'active inclusion' (p.109) and the sharpening of 'evidence-based' discourse in policy resourcing of Adult Education moved from the social justice discourses drawn from the notion of the social contract and driven by the notion of the 'common good' to that of social justice discourses realised through the "market state' whereby individuals are responsible for themselves as human capital (Shannon, 2018, p. 102). The research demonstrates that all countries identify the integration of Soft Skills/ transversal competencies as imperative to the holistic development of society. However, with the changing global and social contexts, the impact of Covid-19 and the consequent economic instability, the focus reverts to readying people for the new world of work by fostering the attributes necessary to manage and cope with uncertainty and rapid change which lies ahead (Shannon, 2018).

Parlarmis and Monnot (2019) suggest that the term Soft Skills needs to be retired altogether, stating that the term is laden with mixed meaning and a new vocabulary is needed to adequately represent the social and organisational skills which are often deprioritised in favour of the 'hard' skills. They offer the term CORE as an acronym for Competence in Organisational and Relational Effectiveness (p. 1); they consider this term more representative of the range of skills encompassed heretofore by 'Soft Skills.' The authors identify the growing importance of Soft Skills and label leadership, teamwork, self-awareness, conflict management, communication and amiability as those skills which underpin organisational success. They acknowledge the importance of technical or 'hard' skills but recognise that they are no longer the differentiating factor for success (Parlarmis and Monnot, 2019).

The main frameworks which have informed the evolution of Soft Skills nomenclature are:

- Life Skills (World Health Organisation, 1993);
- Transversal Competences (Vocational Education and Training; (VET) Further Education and Training (FET), 2020);
- Key Competencies for a successful life and a well-functioning society (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, (OECD);
- Key Competencies for lifelong learning (UE);
- Generic Competences (Tuning, 2000);
- 21st century skills (OECD);
- Future Work Skills (Institute for the Future, (IFF, 2010);
- Skills for Social Progress (OECD, 2015);
- C.O.R.E (Parlarmis and Monnot, 2019)
- Fundamental Skills (White and Shakibnia, 2019)
- Human Factors, (Medical Institute, 2018);
- Uniquely Human Capabilities (World Economic Forum, (WEF) 2020);
- People Centred Skills Intelligence (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, (CEDEFOP, 2021).

3.1.3 Skills and Competence

The terms *skills* and *competence* are used interchangeably across the literature and yet skills are often described as the visible or behavioural components of a competence; this has been highlighted by the European University Continuing Education Network (EUCEN) glossary and the European Union European Qualifications Framework (EQF) where the description/definition of

competence focused on autonomy and responsibility while skills are described as cognitive or practice (EUCEN, 2015). The authors cite the psychological concepts relating to the definition of skills – the relationship between skills, dispositions, beliefs and attitudes and identify Soft Skills as stable as opposed to hard skills which evolve over time. Newman (2016) counters this view by pointing out that emotional intelligence - seen as a collective of Soft Skills - improves and evolves as age and experience accrues. He contrasts this with IQ which he says peaks between the age of 18-22 years. The difference between skill and competence was illustrated by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2005) in the DeSeCo Project: ‘Sustainable development and social cohesion depend critically on the competencies of all of our population – with competencies understood to cover knowledge, skills, attitudes and values’ (OECD, 2005, p.4).

3.1.4 Future skills needs

Businesses must also be alert to the changing environment and ensure that workforce planning is aligned to future skills needs. This has significant implications for Human Resource which will need to focus on delivering a workforce strategy for sustaining business goals and should involve collaborating with upper management, leadership and educational institutions to address lifelong learning and skill requirements (Collings and McMackin, 2019).

The 2022 Global Trends Report (Mercer, 2022) highlights key concerns for HR professionals as:

- Improving workforce planning to better inform buy/build/borrow strategies;
- Designing talent processes around skills;
- Enhancing Total Rewards packages;
- Addressing pay, gender and other equity gaps;
- Investing in workforce upskilling/reskilling;
- Evolving the flexible working culture;
- Redesigning HR operations;
- Putting ESG/sustainability at the heart of the organisation transformation agenda (Mercer, 2022).

According to this report, organisations are now required to show ‘heart’. They are expected to be relatable and those that are ahead of the curve in this regard highlight the following characteristics:

‘These relatable organisations have honed in on a few key success drivers: resetting for stakeholder relevance, building adaptive capability in their people and processes, figuring out how to work in partnership and tackle inequalities, driving outcomes on employee

health and total well-being, incentivizing employability, and harnessing energy for the collective good.’ (Mercer, 2022, p. 6)

Cukier, Hodson and Omar (2018), in their review of the academic literature and focus on graduates, highlight that, employers report a "skills gap" finding that graduates do not possess sufficient Soft Skills to perform effectively. There are significant differences in the perceptions of employers and the perceptions of educators and graduates regarding the level of Soft Skills graduates possess. Skills gaps will continue to be high as skills needs across occupations change in the next five years. The key skills employers see as rising in prominence include *critical thinking*, *problem-solving*, and skills in *self-regulation* and *self-management* such as active learning, resilience, stress tolerance and flexibility (Cukier, 2015).

Pang et al. (2019) indicated that employers value hard skills and Soft Skills as equally important. Their Hong-Kong based employers contend that some of the important Soft Skills going forward are willingness to learn, self-control, cooperation and teamwork, and analytical thinking.

According to the WEF Human Capital Report (2017), workers need to be repurposed to supply the fastest growing industries. Detailed skills information is critical for employers and employees alike. Employers will need to consider how to access adjacent skills, hidden talent pools or how agency models of resourcing could be deployed to address skills shortages. These represent new resourcing models within the workplace and have significant impact on the focus of Human Resource functions within organisations into the future (WEF, 2017). Proactive talent management strategies are needed and there will be significant implications for the future of the Human Resource functions requiring them to be more strategic, working in partnership and engaging in sustained dialogue between businesses, government and education providers (Collings and McMackin, 2019).

Collings and McMackin (2019), in their study funded by Skillnet Ireland, the National Agency for Workforce Learning found that only 30% of their respondents were confident about their state of readiness to meet future skills needs arising from automation, digitalisation and the rise of AI. A key finding of this report relates to the pace of change and its consequent impact: *‘the future of work is already here’* (Collings and McMackin, 2019, p.51)

The potential impact of such changes has a profound impact on the nature of jobs and skills required. One survey respondent identified that 15% of jobs could be eliminated within five years and 50% of jobs will be augmented by technology within 10 years (Collings and McMackin, 2019). Therefore, reskilling becomes a priority. The authors offer six steps as a guide to responding to the future of work which are:

- Find your North Star and communicate it;
- Establish a skills baseline;
- Assess impact of work changes on workforce;
- Align learning and Development team and Resources;
- Plan and Implement;
- Assess and refresh

(Collings and McMackin, 2019, p.31).

Matsouka and Mihail (2016), in their work to determine the centrality of Soft Skills with 178 Graduates of Aristotle University in Greece and 29 Human Resource professionals, explored the difference in perception between graduate and employer around the importance of adequate Soft Skills. They found a considerable difference in perception of Soft Skills competency between graduates and employers with graduates self-assessing as having high levels of Soft Skills but employers seeing graduates as not work ready (Matsouka and Mihail, 2016). In the immediate future, those skills highlighted as priority are those that machines can't, as yet, emulate. According to Wilkie (2019), a survey by the Pew Research Centre of approximately 1,400 technology and education professionals, suggested that young adults need to "learn how to learn" if they hope to adapt to a fast-changing work world.

Cinque (2016), highlighted research carried out by McKinsey, that involved approximately 8,000 employers in eight European countries, 33% of respondents indicated that skills shortages are a major challenge for business along with cost, time and quality. Cukier (2015) contends that the marginalised or disadvantaged may be disproportionately affected by the Soft Skills gap. McKinsey (2020) supports this contending that all three constituents — students, employers, and educators are not aligned when it comes to Soft Skills. Continuing concern exists around impact on the youth population and the unemployment levels in the EU post Covid; youth unemployment within the European Union is currently at 14% as of March 2022 (Statista, 2022). Ireland's current youth unemployment rate as of the same date is 12.6% (Statista, 2022).

Section 2

3.2 Priority Soft Skills for the Future of Work

The WEF (2017) describes the future economic reality as the 'emotional economy' and one which will be dependent on employees with skill sets which are described as 'uniquely human capabilities' (WEF, 2017). Moreover, those specific talents, which are labelled social and service

skills broadly encompassed by the idea of Soft Skills, will be prioritised as the global economy becomes more knowledge and service oriented (WEF, 2017). The most recent WEF Future of Jobs report (2023) highlights Soft Skills third behind the cognitive skills of analytical and creative thinking. The most important Soft Skills are suggested to be resilience, flexibility and agility; motivation and self-awareness; and curiosity and lifelong learning – in recognition of the importance for employees to be able to adapt to disruption in the workplace. This section will explore some of the Soft Skills identified as key to the future world of work.

The WEF (2020) shows the shift in priority towards Soft Skills from 2015 to 2020. Complex problem solving remains at pole position while critical thinking and creativity have moved up in importance. This has a significant implication for the focus of training and education curricula. Emotional intelligence is also identified as important now but was absent from the priority list five years earlier (WEF, 2020).

2015	2020
➤ Complex Problem-solving	➤ Complex Problem-solving
➤ Coordinating with Others	➤ Critical Thinking
➤ People Management	➤ Creativity
➤ Critical Thinking	➤ People Management
➤ Negotiation	➤ Coordinating with Others
➤ Quality Control	➤ Emotional Intelligence
➤ Service Orientation	➤ Judgement and Decision Making
➤ Judgement and Decision Making	➤ Service Orientation
➤ Active Listening	➤ Negotiation
➤ Creativity	➤ Cognitive Flexibility

Figure 3.2: Skills Migration 2015 – 2020, WEF (2020)

The chart above from the WEF (2020) serves to inform priority skills development for the future of work. In general, Soft Skills encompass creativity, problem-solving, collaboration, empathy, and flexibility. In 2015, the OECD produced a report, *Skills for social progress: The power of social and emotional skills*, that presents a synthesis of the OECD's analytical work on the role of socio-

emotional skills. It analysed the impact of skills, individual well-being, and social progress, on diverse areas of life such as Education, health, family life, civic participation and life satisfaction. The report discusses how policy makers, schools, and families facilitate the development of socio-emotional skills and shows that these skills can be measured within cultural and linguistic boundaries (OECD, 2015).

3.2.1 Soft Skills and Emotional Intelligence

Daniel Goleman (1985) in his defining book on Emotional Intelligence considers what he describes as the unravelling of the fabric of society and contends that the development of Emotional Intelligence (EQ) is the best antidote to this. The importance of EQ, he argues, hinges on the link ‘between sentiment, character and moral instincts’ (p. xiii). Goleman asserts that impulse is the medium of emotion and that the seed of all impulse is a ‘Feeling, bursting to express itself in action’ (p. xii). He further suggests that the ability to control impulse is the ‘basis of will and character’ (p. xii). Similarly, altruism is made visible through empathy and that ability to read the emotions of others. He further argues that expanding the meaning of the EQ model puts emotions at the centre of aptitudes for living and asserts that deficits in this regard especially in later years heightens risks of mental health issues (Goleman, 1985). He also highlights the importance of those emotional lessons learned at home or in school and that they have a significant impact on individual emotional development. He sees childhood and adolescence as critical for setting down the essential emotional habits that govern the rest of their lives. Chin (2021) identifies Emotional intelligence as a soft skill.

Goleman and Boyzatis (2008) focus on social intelligence as a conduit for Soft Skills and relate social intelligence ‘skills’ more accurately as competences. Key soft competencies suggested include:

Empathy:	understand motivation and show sensitivity;
Attunement:	listen and observe attentively;
Organisation awareness:	culture, values, social networks, norms; Influence;
	Development others: coaching mentoring, providing feedback;
Inspiration:	articulating a compelling vision;
Teamwork:	support and engender collaboration

(Goleman and Boyzatis, 2008).

According to Newman (2016), Emotional Intelligence is already a differentiating factor in high-quality leadership, and it is increasingly a key employability criterion. Newman (2016) would argue that emotional intelligence improves and evolves as age and experience accrues i.e. over the lifespan. He contrasts this with IQ, which he says peaks between the age of 18-22 years.

EMOTIONAL CAPITAL MODEL OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE



Figure 3.3: Emotional Capital Model (Newman, 2016).

Empathy is suggested across the literature as a priority soft skill. Empathy levels have dropped by 40% over the last 20 years according to the Association of Psychological Science, University of Michigan researchers with data from over 14,000 students. A significant channel for the social adaptation and improvement of health is empathy; it lays a strong foundation for moral development. Cultivating high levels of empathy can result in greater overall wellbeing and promote prosocial behaviour, whereas low levels of empathy are connected to social adjustment and aggression (Xu et al., 2022).

Edmondson, Formica and Mitra (2020) highlight emotional intelligence as a call for empathy and sensibility which are central attributes gaining new significance because of the evolving way of work (Edmondson, Formica and Mitra, 2020). The lack of interdisciplinarity, especially regarding the humanities/sciences divide is one area yet to be addressed; the other relates to the metrics-driven assessment and impact foci that militates against education for empathy, creativity or innovation (Edmondson, Formica and Mitra, 2020).

Project Oxygen, in an investigation of its promotion data since 1998 undertaken by Google showed that, of the eight most important qualities identified of Google's top employees, STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics] skills ranked last (Harrell and Barbato, 2018). The other seven qualities identified were all Soft Skills and include:

- Coaching;
- Communication skills;
- Cognitive flexibility – openness to different values and points of view;
- Empathy;
- Critical thinking;
- Problem solving;
- Drawing conclusions (making connections across complex ideas) (Harrell and Barbato, 2018).

These findings have implications for all stakeholders from individuals to enterprise to Government. To be successful in the next decade, learners will have to anticipate need, continually upskill and reskill and respond quickly. The future workplace will need adaptable lifelong learners (Davies, Fidler and Gorbis, 2011).

Of the six priority skills identified by Institute for the Future (IFF) Future Work Skills 2020, (Davies, Fidler and Gorbis, 2011), five relate to Soft Skills. They include:

- Social Intelligence - connect in a deep and direct way to others;
- Novel and adaptive thinking – solutions oriented, critical thinking;
- Virtual Collaboration – leveraging new media for persuasive communications;
- Cross-cultural Competency – ability to operate in myriad cultural settings;
- Sense making – determine deeper meaning of significance from what is expressed;
- Computational Thinking – translates vast amounts of data and abstract reasoning.

Globalisation is creating an increasingly diverse and multinational workplace which will drive a demand for Soft Skills. Employers are putting greater emphasis on Soft Skills in job descriptions for recruitment. Indeed.com, an Irish recruiter, surveyed 1000 employers (2020) to ascertain the most important attributes of their top performers which were:

- **Problem solving:** Creativity; research; risk management; teamwork; critical thinking; analysis and decision-making. With regard to critical thinking, LaFortune, Pallascio and Daniel (2004) contend that there is no one definition but critical thinking links to an attitude of open-mindedness; tolerance for uncertainty and growth mindset and awareness of the impact of emotion (Dweck, 2016).
- **Communication Skills:** Active listening; confidence; conflict resolution; empathy; presenting; writing and non-verbal communication. Listening is frequently overlooked (Brink and Costigan 2015).
- **Adaptability/Flexibility:** Organisation; optimism; consistency and growth mindset (Newman 2009) links adaptability as high tolerance of uncertainty and positive change orientation. Growth mindset has become a well understood term used to determine open mindedness to learning, curiosity and passion for learning all underpinned by the belief that ability is neither finite nor predetermined and that achievement is based on effort (Dweck, 2016).

Cimatti (2016) suggests Soft Skills as predictors of success in life and found a correlation between Soft Skills competencies and personal and professional achievement (Cinque, 2015). Deming (2015) reported an increase in jobs with higher social skills requirements. De Rond (2007) identified in his ethnographic research with the Cambridge University Rowing Team, a trade-off between hard skill technical competence and social intelligence to get the best out of a team as a whole (De Rond, 2007). Both Deming (2017) and Balcar (2016) identified the complementarity between hard and Soft Skills and that productivity and promotion was enhanced by the combination of both.

3.2.2 Soft Skills, Neurobiology and Leadership

In his work in 'The Five Dysfunctions of a Team', social psychologist, Patrick Lencioni (2002), identified the five key pillars that would damage team functioning and they are all related to non-technical elements of Soft Skills and values and include: absence of trust; fear of conflict; lack of

commitment; avoidance of accountability and inattention to results (Lencioni, 2002). Therefore, the constituents of good teamwork are trust, open challenge, commitment to the work, holding each other to account and goal oriented.

The Harvard Business Review Collaboration on Social Intelligence and the Biology of Leadership identified the concept of 'mood contagion' which was originally applied to leadership impact but is now considered through a neurobiological lens. It shows that shared behaviours unify a team and bonded groups perform better than fragmented groups. According to neurobiology, exhibiting positive behaviours and Soft Skills such as empathy creates chemical connection between people at a neurological level. This has been shown to boost emotional commitment and retention. Positive mood orientation enables people to take in information effectively and respond nimbly and creatively (Sala, 2003). Sala highlights the function of mirror neurons which detect others' smiles and laughter which prompts smiles and laughter in return - 'Laughter is serious business' (Sala, 2003, p. 27).

Jim Collins (2006), in his work on Authentic Leadership, highlights the paradoxical combination of 'personal humility and professional will' (p. 2) as the basis for his long-term study with Harvard on what makes good companies great. His study selected 11 companies from the Fortune 500, studied them for five years, asking just one question – what makes this company great. The criteria for entry to the study were stringent, companies had to have experienced exponential growth and sustained it over time. Only 11 companies were eligible. Collins (2006) suggests that some of the conclusions of his study would be useful to companies facing the current reality.

3.2.3 Resilience

Career Resilience (CR), as a research focus, has been prevalent in recent years and has been defined in many ways with lots of debate around whether it is a trait, a capacity or a process. It is generally accepted that CR is about adapting and persisting when faced with disruption or adversity and acknowledging its importance in considering careers in today's turbulent economic environment (Caza and Milton, 2012; Kossek and Perrigino, 2016; Mishra and McDonald, 2017).

Individual characteristics - traits, skills, attitudes and behaviours - have been found to impact resilience. Contextual factors such as supportive workplaces, job characteristics and supportive family also are important influences of CR (Mishra and McDonald, 2017). These individual and contextual factors are those 'risk and protective factors' that Rochat, Masdonati, and Dauwalder (2017) suggest contributing positively to career resilience. Lack, or absence of resources, can put individuals at risk and reduce their ability to be resilient; whereas protective factors such as strong

social support and a variety of skills can lead to positive outcomes. The McKinsey Institute (Lund et al., 2020) echo this view (but from a systems perspective), noting that successfully moving beyond this crisis will likely require adaptation, Innovation and learning.

3.2.4 Developing Broader Capabilities

According to the EU Recommendation paper, a growing number of people need to update and improve their knowledge, skills and competences to fill the gap between their formal education and training to keep pace with the needs of a fast-changing society and labour market. The recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and the digital and green transitions have accelerated the pace of change in how people live, learn and work and be better equipped to deal with current and future challenges. The pandemic has affected the career prospects of both young people and adults across the world, has increased unemployment and damaged the physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of hundreds of millions of people in Europe (EU, June 2022).

OECD (2019) deems it imperative to educate learners to increase their capabilities beyond just skills and knowledge. Specific to this is: developing imagination; awareness; knowledge; skills; values' intellectual and moral maturity and responsibility. Other challenges for Ireland will include demographic bulge – increase in demand for higher education places by 2030. Literacy and numeracy levels- basic skills - are poor in the older cohorts and the OECD survey (PIAAC) showed Ireland placed 17 out of 24 countries.

Section 3 - Teaching and Learning

3.3 Key Teaching Strategies for Soft Skills

Anthony and Garner (2016) carried out a study aimed to evaluate the efficacy of several modes of teaching Soft Skills in the classroom in order to improve pedagogical approaches. They assigned five distinct assignments and analysed students' perceptions of the relative helpfulness of each assignment to make recommendations for business and professional communication educators. Some reports suggested that colleges lack the provision of important Soft Skills, such as communication, writing, oral presentation skills, and interpersonal skills (Fiore and Salas, 2013; Tugend, 2013.)

Anthony and Garner (2016) tested five different learning methods to support the development of Soft Skills on Business students asking them to rate the most effective methods in terms of impact on them. The five methods explored were self-analysis; guest speaker; interview; journal article and Soft Skills video. The students rated the Guest Lecture and Learning journal as the most

effective. The former provides practice experience for another, and the latter drives up self-awareness (Anthony and Garner, 2016).

Klein, DeRoun and Salas (2006) suggest a blend of formal and non-formal strategies to include role-play, behaviour modelling, coaching, feedback and simulation. They highlight the importance of these skills asserting that organisations and providers need to define, articulate, train, and reward. They identify data collection and standard assessment methods as areas for future research. They also assert a strong need to commit to learning across the life cycle stating that adult learning is more about the process than the outcome (Klein, DeRoun and Salas, 2006).

The *European Association for the Education of Adults* (EAEA, 2017) reports that only circa 11% of adults in the European Union aged between 25 and 64 were participating in education and training programmes. In Ireland, Lifelong learning rates as of 2018 were at 13%, despite the aims of the National Skills Strategy, Ireland failed to achieve the 15% national target set by the EU for 2020. The OECD report (2019) found that workers must continuously learn new skills to remain competitive, which requires curiosity, flexibility and a positive outlook on lifelong learning (OECD, 2019). OECD (2019) asserted the importance of meta-cognition as a key skill for Lifelong Learning. Meta-cognition refers to the processes that enable reflection on one's own thinking and includes critical thinking and awareness and foregrounds the work of Jack Mezirow (1987) on Reflective Practice.

Scheerens et al. (2020) address what they see as a shifting emphasis on learner social and emotional development. It provides some order on the vast range of desirable socio-emotional education objectives and uses instructional and psychological constructs to arrive at meaningful categorizations of social-emotional "skills". One of the key assumptions is that social and emotional attributes are malleable by means of educational interventions.

Maunsell (2023) suggests that 'there is evidence of a new paradigm occurring at further and higher education levels – where learning modules and research projects encourage a multidisciplinary approach' (p.5). He further suggests that modules including Work Experience, Communications, Teamwork and Personal and Professional Development contribute to the development of transversal skills. Maunsell (2023, p.5) points out that there is a range of modules delivered across FET which include group work, project work and experiential learning that can develop the transversal skills of learners. He cites the research of Lopez and Lopez (2020) who contend 'that properly planned work experience, underpinned by good theoretical knowledge acquired in class develops and reinforces the transversal skills of learners' (Lopez and Lopez, 2020).

Lopez and Lopez (2020) conducted a thematic and bibliometric review of research carried out between 2010 and 2020 on transversal competences taught as part of vocational education and training. They conclude that there is a lack of research at VET level and that more empirical research needs to be conducted on how transversal competences develop and how they can be acquired (p.17). They state that they have observed in the literature that 'classrooms can be a place to practise with alternative ways of facilitating learning and integrating hard and Soft Skills in a formal educational context (p.9). However, Soft Skills seem to be difficult to teach and even harder to assess in that context' (Cimatti, 2016).

Maunsell (2023) points out that transversal skills should be embedded into the curriculum notwithstanding the need to link them to the proposed context. He emphasises the importance of stakeholder collaboration and points out a series of needed steps:

- 'identify the transversal skills relevant for each programme and define accordingly
- define the skills required according to the level being delivered e.g., Level 5 or Level 6
- embed the skills into the curriculum in order to ensure their training and gain synergies;
- design teaching activities in the class for the acquisition of the defined transversal skills;
- Use evaluation tools to determine the outcome of the competencies' (p.9).

Several educational theories underpin the acquisition of Soft Skills. Vygotsky (1978), whose theory emphasises the roles of social interaction in the development of the learner, believed strongly that community plays a central role in the process of making meaning. Other key strategies of the Vygotskian approach are Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), More Knowledgeable Other and Process of Internalisation. Vygotsky's theory encourages collaborative learning, peer interaction, teacher guidance and support, and culturally sensitive education. It also underlines the importance of understanding each student and their current level of development, so that teaching can be mapped to their individual ZPD.

Dewey (1938) posited that learning is a continuous cycle involving direct experience, reflection, and application. It underscores the significance of the context, personal engagement, and critical reflection as key elements of the learning journey. He further proposed that genuine learning occurs in a practical and applied setting via problem solving when individuals encounter problems

or uncertainties in their experiences which requires them to engage in critical thinking to make sense of these situations and derive solutions. Kolb (1984) developed Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) which describes the process by which individuals learn through experience. According to Kolb, learning is a cyclical process comprising four distinct stages: Concrete Experience (CE): this is the action phase, where an individual accrues the experiences an event or situation; Reflective Observation (RO): this is where the individual reflects on the experience to make sense of it; Abstract Conceptualization (AC): based on the reflection (RO), the individual develops theories or ideas about the contributory factors leading up to the experience. They conceptualize the experience and form generalizations or conclusions; Active experimentation (AE): these theories are tested in new situations, applying the learning to see if their hypotheses hold true. Kolb suggests that learning is most effective when an individual cycles through all four stages, but he posits that people have a preferred learning style based on their dominance in one of these four stages. These styles are Converging (AC+AE), Diverging (CE+RO), Assimilating (AC+RO), and Accommodating (CE+AE).

The teaching of Soft Skills can also relate to the views and philosophies of the educator, as Ragusa et al. (2022) suggest, 'it is important to consider the incorporation of hard and Soft Skills courses in the teaching curriculum in order to motivate teachers and improve the values of humanistic pedagogy, which would promote the pedagogical culture and generate forms of continuous learning' (p.9). Reflective approaches in education are those enable individuals to gain deeper insights and develop greater understanding through the process of actively reflecting on their learning experiences, actions, feelings, and responses. Reflection is a central aspect of professional development, learning, and especially relevant to the teaching of soft skills and the assessment of Soft Skills acquisition. Dewey's experiential learning model identifies Reflection as essential to draw out understanding and meaning from the learning experience. Through reflection, learners identify patterns, make connections, and apply prior knowledge. Dewey is identified by Moon (2013) as presenting the backbone philosophies of Reflective Practice.

Schön [1987], described the difference between reflection-in-action (reflecting while doing something) and reflection-on-action (reflecting after the event has occurred) as crucial to teaching practice. Moon (2013) who refers to Reflective Practice as a form of 'Cognitive Housekeeping' (p. 111) to represent a form of mental sorting, categorising and clarifying process applied to information and experiences. This process requires the learner to iterate, re-organise and re-interpret their experiences giving rise to new understanding. The reflective process also enables learners to deal with the cognitive dissonance which results from learning which challenges

currently held beliefs and also serves to reinforce memory of the learning experience and deepen the learning. Moon highlights the transformative nature of reflective practice and the deeper learning that can accrue from this process (2013).

3.3.1 Diverse Cultural Experience as a route to the acquisition of Soft Skills

Erasmus+ is a European funded programme focused on promoting European mobility between its citizens. The new Erasmus+ programme (2021-2027) invests heavily in providing opportunities for organisations and individuals to work in partnership to develop and deliver project focused on exchange of expertise, development of intellectual outputs and placement and exchange projects (European Commission, 2018).

Mobility, or exchange projects are funded widely under the programme for placement or exchange opportunities in FET and Youth. The European Solidarity Corps (ESC) provides the opportunity for people to volunteer in another country for a 12-month period. Young people with fewer opportunities undertaking a placement as part of the QQI programme, may have an accompanying person – also funded under the programme – to facilitate the settling in period for the young person (Erasmus+ Programme Guide, 2021).

Evaluations at individual project level, at national level, carried out by Leargas or at international level, usually undertaken by a working group of National Agencies or the European Commission, have repeatedly identified the transformational benefit from such intercultural experiences.

McLoughlin (2021) carried out research on staff mobility projects to determine the impact of the experience on educational leadership and professional development in FET. Findings were very positive in enhancing Teacher Agency and self-determination in their approach to work; the personal autonomy that resulted from increased capacity from the intercultural experience resulted in enhanced pedagogical practice within the classroom. Self-confidence and efficacy was also highlighted by the participating teachers coming from the trust placed in them to disseminate their exposure to best practice in their partner institution.

The experience of young people on placement as an integral part of their VET level 6 programme, was tracked over a five-year period and reported in *Study on Impact of European Placements of Vocational Learners from Ireland*. 92% of participants reported a positive or highly positive experience. Findings report more than 75% of participants said their placement had developed or improved their communication and team-working skills, and their ability to work in an international environment. 64% learned elements of their profession they could not otherwise

learn in school or college. More than 65% agreed that work experience had a real impact on their future career development. 55% agreed that their placements had positively influenced the grades they received in their vocational training. Finally, almost two thirds agreed that their participation had helped them get a job (see Fig 3.4).

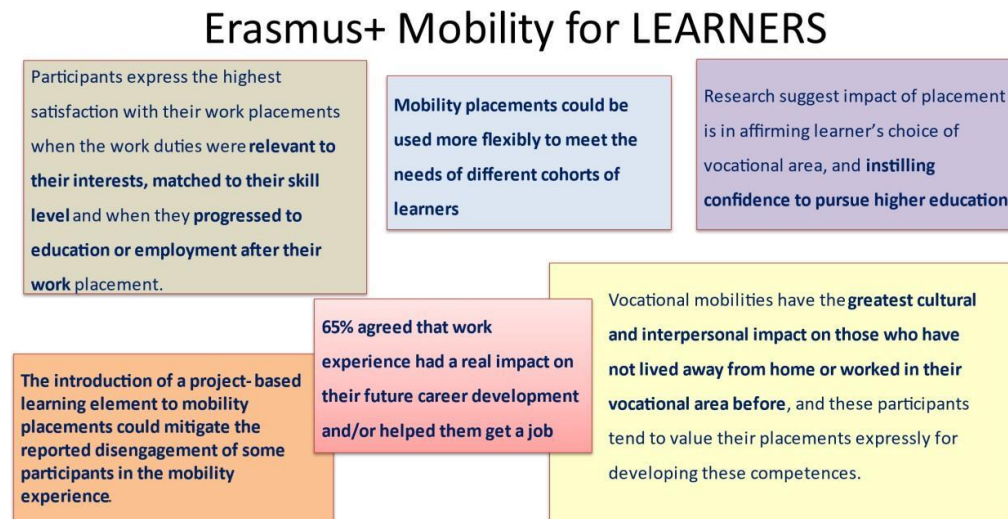


Figure 3.4: Impact of Erasmus + mobility participants; verbatim quotes (Leargas, 2020)

The Institute of the Future (IFF, 2010) identifies a range of learning methodologies which are used in the delivery/acquisition of Soft Skills:

- Cooperative Learning: facilitated small group work;
- Problem-based/Project-based learning: small groups working together to solve a problem with a tutor;
- Action Learning: facilitates and enhances the learning of groups coming together to tackle real challenges with learning accruing through reflection and action;
- Experiential learning: it is the process of grasping meaning from the experience itself; Requires analytical skills to enable reflection and conceptualisation.
- Reciprocal learning: two students form a learning partnership;
- Progressive mastery: it is characterised by sequential micro-reinforcement in units of learning to build toward a competence. ECVET is an example.
- Critical reflection: students enhance reflection and their metacognition about the activities performed (IFF, 2010).
- Active seeking of meaning: An individualised learning approach whereby the learner seeks the personal and social meaning of activities and experiences to overcome difficulties arising during study.

From 2019, onward the OECD Future of Education and Skills project (2030) shifts its focus from learning to teaching in the knowledge that teachers are the key to implementing curricula; that the relational aspects of teaching cannot be emulated by technology at this time so that coaching and mentoring will remain human capacities of enduring value (Schleicher, 2018).

Cukier, Hodson and Omar (2018) contend that Soft Skills are acquired via a range of learning methods in the workplace, via coaching, training and mentoring. Some segments of the population are disadvantaged by lack of access to coaching, training and role models needed to develop these skills. In addition, the lack of consistency in definition coupled with the fragmentation of the stakeholders involved in Soft Skills development compounds the problem. More agreement around expectations is needed to bridge the gap between supply and demand.

Ibrahim and Boerhannoeddin (2017) conducted a quantitative study using regression analysis to ascertain the relationship between soft skill acquisition, the in-company training methodology and the consequent impact on performance. The study found that two predictors – soft skill acquisition and training methodology – significantly predict employee performance. The authors identified the need to redesign the methodology for in-company training of Soft Skills, ‘...time-spaced learning’ (p. 1), as a methodology was deemed highly effective for training transfer. This method was identified as effective in enabling employees to internalise the learning by having intermittent breaks to allow them to absorb and apply the learning. It was seen as having a positive impact on employee behaviour and relationships.

3.3.2 Social and Emotional Learning

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is defined as the process of acquiring core competencies to recognise and manage emotions, set and achieve goals, appreciate perspectives of others, make responsible decisions and handle interpersonal situations constructively. The development of social, emotional, and ethical competencies are a vital dimension of educational aims (Cohen, 2006). The CARE programme (Jennings et al., 2011) – *Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education* – produced efficacy studies to show the value of the prosocial classroom.

SEL addresses learner capacity to coordinate cognition, effect, and behaviour to navigate the daily challenges and success in career and life (Osher et al., 2016). According to the organisation Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), the five main competency areas of SEL are: Self-awareness; self-management; social awareness; relationship skills and decision-making (Weissberg and Cascarino, 2013).

In the context of Social and Emotional Learning, an example of a strategy implemented to foster the development of such Soft Skills is provided by O'Dwyer (2018), who tested the feasibility and impact of an arts-based intervention (introduction of a choir in a high-pressured medical work setting) to promote social and emotional competencies, resilience and well-being.

Baseline psychological measures of stress, anxiety, resilience, and burnout were carried out using:

- Brief Symptom Inventory;
- Maaslach burnout Inventory;
- Five-facet Mindfulness Scale;
- Brief Resilience Scale;
- Scale of Protective Factors (O'Dwyer, 2018).

The study saw an overwhelmingly positive outcome with participants identifying reduced stress, improved mental health, and greater proactivity at work. The work suggests further development of such interventions would be useful in equipping junior medics with greater levels of resilience. It would have an application in the development of resilience needed to navigate the complex and fast-moving world of work and beyond the impact of Covid-19 (O'Dwyer, 2018).

3.3.3 Situated Learning

Situated learning is defined as being located in a particular setting the thinking and doing processes to develop knowledge and skill (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This necessitates the creation of conditions in which participants will experience the learning with all its complexity in the context of the real world. Participants create their own knowledge from the experience, i.e., the relationships with other participants, the activities, the environmental cues, and the social organisation

The four pillars guiding the development of classroom activities for a situated learning experience (Anderson, Reder, and Simon, 1996).

1. Learning is grounded in the actions of everyday circumstance
2. Knowledge is acquired situationally and transfers to similar situations
3. Learning is the result of a social process incorporating thought, perception, problem solving, interacting and procedural knowledge;
4. Learning is not separated from the world of action but exists in robust, complex, social environments made up of participants, actions, and situations.

These four premises differentiate situated learning from other experiential forms of knowledge acquisition in that learners acquire knowledge through activities and experience rather than instruction by doing a task that mirrors the real work environment. Situated learning adopts a participative teaching methodology. (Anderson, Reder, and Simon, 1996). This also reflects Vygotskian theory instructional concepts such as "scaffolding" and "apprenticeship", in which a more knowledgeable other helps to structure a task so that the learner can work on it successfully. Vygotsky's theories (1978) also feed into collaborative learning, suggesting that group members should have different levels of ability so more knowledgeable others can assist less advanced members operate within their Zone of Proximal Development. It is the responsibility of the teacher to provide the instructional environment within the classroom where learning can take place through the tangible manifestation of skills and knowledge. Vygotsky (1978) views desirable and observable behaviour the ultimate goal of any educational paradigm (Mahmoodi-Shahrebabaki, 2019).

3.3.4 Project-Based Mentoring

Alper (2017) argued the value of this approach in her book 'Teach to Work', extolling the virtues of blending the generations within the workplace; she uses a mentoring framework to exchange knowledge and expertise and build capacity in the younger, more recent entrants into the workplace.

Alper writes that schools will have to change the what and the how of what they teach if they are to better prepare students for the workforce. She encourages educators by highlighting through student stories, the value-add of having adjunct mentors work with students (Alper, 2017).

3.3.5 Assessment

Assessment of Soft Skills is a persistent challenge across the literature. Creativity and creative thinking emerged in the literature as early as the 2000's with some difference of opinion around whether Soft Skills are innate or can be developed and nurtured through experience (Dyer, Gregersen and Christensen, 2009). The more recent emergence of design thinking as a skill set would seem to support the latter assertion that these skills can be nurtured through modelling and experience. While there are some standardised tests for some basic skills for example, writing and critical reasoning, many Soft Skills can only be assessed in context and just as there is little agreement on definition, there is equally little agreement on assessment (WEF, 2019). The many stakeholders involved in the development and assessment of Soft Skills agree that a combination of formal and experiential learning is required (WEF, 2019).

The new FET strategy for Ireland (2020 – 2024) refers to core skills specifically, with regard to communication, but identifies the need for all modules to have a component of transversal skills to prepare the student for the workplace: ‘FET can help develop core skills that are critical [.....] like digital capacity, communications, marketing and people management’ (SOLAS, 2020, p. 14). Gibb (2014) highlights that Soft Skills are not well assessed with a lack of effective processes and systems in place to do so. Four areas of concern emerged in his paper for the improvement of soft skill assessment:

1. A focus on the assessment of Soft Skills separate to any other environment – e.g., leadership, work environment, graduate employment;
2. There is a need for inter- contextual research to understand the environment where assessment took place of Soft Skills and their influence on such assessment/ outcomes;
3. Longitudinal data for soft skill assessment also needs to be a focus for future research so results can be quantified, analysed and measured for consistency (Gibb, 2014).

The evaluation of empathy levels within a tutor learner environment consistently highlights the importance of self-evaluation over other forms of evaluation such as evaluation based upon objective criteria (Aldrup, Carstensen and Klusmann, 2022). A tutor’s own emotional intelligence levels can influence the psychosocial outcomes of the learner and are essential to the quality of interactions between tutor and learner.

3.3.6 Reflective Practice

The OECD Learning Compass 2030 (2021) offers the Anticipation-Action-Reflection cycle (AAR) as an effective, iterative learning process: ‘an iterative process whereby learners continuously improve their thinking and act intentionally and responsibly, moving towards long-term goals that contribute to collective well-being’ (OECD, 2021, p.2). Anticipation refers to learners becoming informed on how actions today may have future consequences and use their ability to predict and anticipate consequences. It further helps them understand their own intentions and that of others and overall, widen and deepen their perspective; Action demonstrates that the learner has capacity to take action towards wellbeing and be mindful of the intended consequences of any action taken. Reflection shows how learners improve their thinking through reflection to improve all that went before: Reflection is a systematic, rigorous, disciplined way of thinking, with its roots in scientific inquiry (OECD, 2021, p.2).

3.3.7 Micro-Credentials

Micro-Credentials are defined as: ‘smaller units of assessed learning recognised by higher education institutions and other trusted credential-bearing agencies or professional bodies’ (Nic Giolla Mhichíl et al., 2021, p. 5). Micro-credentials are seen as an emerging area that allows flexibility in learning to address the growing need for upskilling and reskilling of employers and employees. It is seen as a robust, holistic, system-wide process to accredit industry-based learning (Nic Giolla Mhichíl et al., 2021). Credentialed short learning programmes are seen as one way to address the challenges being faced by employers and employees because of increased automation, skills obsolescence and general social change. The EU identifies, in its New Skills Agenda (2020) micro-credentials as a key building block in addressing the challenge of developing 21st century skills and to promote lifelong and life-wide learning. The report highlights that the current credential system needs to evolve to adequately prepare people for the industry 4.0 workplace. Micro credentials and digital badges may make lifelong learning more accessible: ‘...smaller forms of credentialed learning (such as Micro-credentials), when embedded in a coherent framework, may deliver more flexible, stackable and transformative learning experiences for both employees and employers’ (p.5).

CEDEFOP (2023) in their report on Micro credentials in Ireland found that the Irish qualifications system already includes qualifications as small as five credits (Minor Awards) and is open to free-standing qualifications through its category of Special Purpose Awards. Micro credentials of fewer than five credits can already be aggregated and potentially used in RPL processes to gain exemptions from parts of, and advanced entry to, programmes leading to qualifications in the NFQ. There is also much variation in the key elements of MCs, including the QA processes and standards applied, the assessment methods used and the possibilities for combination and accumulation. This makes it difficult for learners and employers to have confidence in all micro credentials available in the learning ‘marketplace’.

3.4 Conclusion

Soft Skills, as a concept, lacks clarity and consistency across the literature. Definitions overlap, are broad in scope and the absence of focus makes it difficult to make meaningful assertions. There are distinctions between basic skills and Soft Skills; between Soft Skills and emotional intelligence; between Soft Skills that relate to behaviour and those that relate to awareness i.e. what people do versus who people are. The term ‘Soft Skills’ downplays their importance in this increasingly complex ‘glocal, liquid and networked’ world in which workers must now operate (Clarke, 2017).

Added to this complexity is the post Covid-19 world of work and the likely Covid-induced recession is expected to give rise to high levels of unemployment with women, low-earners, low-skilled and Young People not Engaged in Employment or Training (NEETs) most at risk. The requirement for multiple upskilling pathways and for Lifelong learning has become imperative to enable people to acquire the skills necessary for the future workplace. Given the rapid advancements in technology and high rate of skills obsolescence, Soft Skills are now more important than ever as those that will help people navigate long-term uncertainty. The skills prioritised above others are adaptability, also called cognitive flexibility which is identified as a subset of emotional intelligence. Other social and emotional skills, inter and intrapersonal skills are identified, many of which, when combined, constitute resilience. The stress of a dynamic workplace coupled with an 'always on' culture has been shown to reduce efficiency (Accenture, 2015).

Once clarified and classified, the next consideration is how these skills are taught, learned, and acquired. There are many learning models, and the literature suggests that training for transformation requires a combination of methods to facilitate Soft Skills acquisition. The literature suggests a combination of formal and non-formal approaches, modelling, apprenticeships, and coaching to mention a few. Soft Skills have been undervalued to date but as the profile of the workplace changes and becomes multigenerational, multicultural, and technological, Soft Skills as enablers take prime position.

The next chapter will focus on the methodology, methods, and approaches used in this research study, including the ethical considerations, sample of participations and limitations.

Chapter 4: Methodology

The chapter will present the methodological argument for this thesis by outlining the value and focus of qualitative research and justify the adoption of the exploratory case study. To do so, it will first present an overview of the research philosophy, paradigmatic stance, and the methodological approach of this study. The overall aim of this study is to identify the priority Soft Skills for the future of work and the implications for provision in FET. The chapter provides definitions of epistemology and ontology and will also offer the key tenets of positivist and interpretivist paradigms focusing on the epistemological and ontological assumptions of each paradigm. It will outline the data gathering process, tools, as well as issues of validity.

A five-phase framework for the research process is suggested by Denzin & Lincoln (2005) and will form the structural basis of this chapter. The five phases are: 1) the role of the researcher, 2) the research paradigm, 3) research strategy (methodology), 4) Data collection & analysis, and 5) Interpretation.

Research Framework

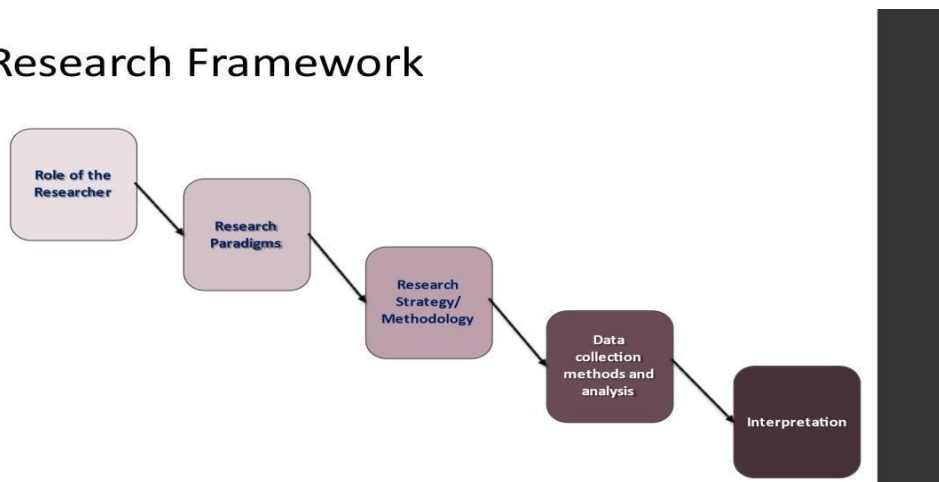


Figure 4.1: Research Framework (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005)

4.1 Phase 1 – The Role of the Researcher & Positionality

As with all research, it is necessary to outline the researcher's philosophical stance that informs this study and the philosophical principles which impact the research approach and methods through which data is gathered and analysed (Creswell & Clark, 2007). Researchers can have a

significant impact on a study, and it is essential that their own assumptions and personal beliefs are recognised and considered at the beginning of the research process.

Maykut and Moorehouse (1995) contend that ‘...the qualitative researcher or naturalistic inquirer is a part of the investigation as a participant observer, an in-depth interviewer, or a leader of a focus group but also removes him/herself from the situation to rethink the meanings of the experience’ (p. 25). Miriam (2009) contends that the researcher is a ‘key instrument’ (p. 15) in the qualitative research process; from the outset in designing the research questions, to the data collection and analysis and ultimately to the interpretation and identification of findings. Walford (2009) identifies the researcher role as moving through five stages: newcomer, provisional acceptance, categoric acceptance, personal acceptance, and imminent migrant. Quinn Patton asserts that the qualitative researcher must immerse themselves in the naturally occurring complexity of the phenomenon (2002, p. 48), offering the term “empathic neutrality” as a way of bridging between objectivity and subjectivity in qualitative research. He defines “empathic neutrality” as that central balancing space ‘between becoming too involved and remaining too distant’ (2002, p. 50).

This current researcher recognises their own ‘empathic neutrality’ is influenced by a long career in the field of education and training working into a corporate environment and with a strong focus on the value of Soft Skills (Ormston et al., 2014). Over the 20 + year career, the researcher has seen the value of enhanced Soft Skills for employees in high-pressure work environments where little support has been given by companies for people-development in this area. Over two decades, the increased pace of delivery in the workplace, the pressure under which employees perform all serve to impact the ‘empathic neutrality’ of the researcher. As with any practitioner-research work, researcher positionality is a key consideration. Positionality is reflected in the ‘position the researcher has chosen to adopt within a given research study’ (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013 p.71) and is usually located in three areas: 1) The research subject, 2) the participants, and 3) the process.

4.1.1 The research subject

Reflexivity is the process whereby researchers acknowledge and disclose themselves in their own research to understand their own part in it and potentially their influence on it (Cohen et al., 2011). Reflexivity informs positionality. As a psychologist, teacher, trainer and coach, with a career spanning three decades in both education and business, I find myself situated (Rowe, 2014) in each of the domains that apply to this cross-disciplinary topic of Soft Skills. As someone who has a keen interest in Neuroscience and the evolving developments in the field, I am aware

that my positionality is context-dependent and not static/fluid. As time passes, our understanding of the neurobiological developments as they impact Soft Skills is enhanced.

I hold deep beliefs about the value of Soft Skills to the individual and the achievement of their potential, the culture of the organisation and society itself. While this current study focuses on the workplace as part of the context, Soft Skills have a value that goes far beyond the workplace. They are the skills that act as psychological protective factors for the individual across their life, and not just work, giving people freedom of choice and building active citizens. The motivation to carry out this study is that until recently, organisations paid little attention to the value of these skills - they were seen as 'nice to have' but neither central to the achievement of workplace objectives nor seen as relevant to the professional development of the employee. Now, post-Covid, these skills are acknowledged as more necessary than ever, to equip people to deal with the levels of uncertainty being experienced in the fallout of the pandemic.

Being aware of the ethical issues which may arise when an 'insider' researcher conducts a qualitative study is key to protect from ethical issues, such as, role - conflict between the group and the researcher role. The nature and depth of pre-existing relationships is acknowledged, but Toy-Cronin (2022) argues the fluidity of the 'insider' term, stating that a researcher is never truly either insider or outsider and that positionality related to the research participants can be fluid and multidimensional (Toy-Cronin, 2022).

Holmes (2020) argues the advantages of the insider position which are: the researcher is 'one of us' (p. 6); the insider has the ability to ask more meaningful questions because of their prior knowledge; the researcher may be more trusted and secure more honesty in the responses to questions posed; the researcher may be better able to understand the context, language and other cultural cues.

Reviewing my positionality, I bring knowledge and commitment to the study. I am very aware of the potential to influence the research and have set out below process and tools to ensure the research is as clear as it can be of any bias to protect researcher objectivity and guarding my empathic neutrality referred to above as much as is possible. Part of the learning that accrued related to interviewing technique and that 'stepping away' referred to by Holmes (2022) to let the interviewee speak.

4.1.2 The participants

Some of the Employer CEO's and CRHO participants were known to the researcher through work, so critical reflection was a necessary step to ensure that questions were clear of any bias. To this end, the researcher kept a critical reflection diary throughout the research process and used it as a discussion tool to explore potential bias in a self-dialogic process. That self-dialogic process focused on how I have constructed my identity with regard to others.

Each interviewee was provided with an interview guide in advance and the researcher took care to adhere to the framework of questions for each cohort of participants. Jasper (2005) argues that 'the centrality of the role of the researcher to qualitative studies is paramount — reflective writing using journals and research logs establishes that centrality and often contains the clues to the creativity and interpretation within the work that discovers and describes new understandings of people's experiences' (p.257). She further suggests that the researcher's reflections can provide what she calls 'safeguards against intimations of bias, over-involvement and vested interest' (ibid).

4.1.3 The process

The researcher took care to pilot the data collection tools in advance to ensure that any bias was removed and that questions were value neutral, clear, and unambiguous. The thematic analysis process (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was applied to all data and cross tabulated by age, gender, role and setting. All findings were underpinned by verbatim quotations from participants with a clear referencing system to ensure that the participant role and mode of data collection was transparent and evidenced by the inclusion of transcripts and sample questionnaires and coding (See Appendices).

4.2 Phase 2 – The Research Paradigm

Kuhn (1977) identified the research paradigm as the framework within which the values, assumptions and beliefs about the nature and approach to research are contained. Guba & Lincoln (1994) defined a paradigm as: '... the basic belief system or world view that guides the investigation' (p. 105). Although Guba and Lincoln (1989) state it is not possible to identify the research paradigm by the selected research alone, the researcher's world view should be influential in their choice of methods (Mertens, 1998). The paradigm therefore provides information on the ontological, epistemological and methodological stance of the research. Denzin asserts that paradigms are 'human constructions' (2010, p.421) and, as such, are subject

to revision and debate. There have been different paradigmatic models proposed over the last decade. For the purpose of this study, the areas to be examined are: Positivism, Post-positivism, and Interpretivism.

4.2.1 Positivism

Comte (1931) is credited as the originator of the term positivism which arose from his understanding that the essence of the physical was veiled from researchers and that all inquiry into a phenomenon should be empirical and scientific, verifiable, and underpinned by logic. Comte also asserted that society was governed by the same natural laws as physical phenomena such as gravity. Positivism supports the introduction of methods of the natural sciences to the practices of the social sciences (Crotty, 1998, p. 24). In the early 20th century, the Vienna school progressed Comte's vision of research into logical positivism that wished to bring the methods and practices of mathematics into the study of philosophy. Logical positivism fostered 'the principle of verifiability'. Positivism is therefore identified with quantitative research in the natural sciences as well as finding popularity in a wide range of social science research contexts. The positivist approach posits that reality is real, can be captured, studied, and understood. This is contrasted with the post-positivist point of view, which highlights that full apprehension of reality is not possible; it can only be approximated (Guba, 1990, p.22). Positivism suggests that meaningful statements can only be asserted when verified through observation.

4.2.2 Post Positivism

The post positivist approach has stronger links to qualitative research which 'is oriented towards analysing concrete cases in their temporal and local particularity and starting from people's expressions and activities in their local contexts' (Flick, 2006, p. 30). New extrapolative methods were providing knowledge that demonstrated the need for more robust approaches to research, as against 'passively noting laws that are found in nature' (Crotty, 1998, p. 31). There are abstractions in the area of social science, e.g., intelligence and motivation, which require indirect forms of measurement (Onwuegbuzie and Daniel, 2002, p. 89).

Post positivism recognises the role of subjective interpretation, previous experience and knowledge as it contributes to the researcher position. Cohen et al. (2007) suggest that reality has multiple layers and is complex. Post positivists contend that people interpret phenomena through interaction and attach meaning to experience. Ritchie et al. (2013) asserted that 'knowledge is produced by exploring and understanding the social world of the people being studied, focusing on their meanings and interpretations' (p. 12). A post positive paradigm is used in this research.

4.2.3 Interpretivism

According to Moss (1994), interpretative research is predicated on the desire for a deeper understanding of how people experience life and the world through language, local situation, and the interactions of the people involved. Critics of this paradigm state that this 'construed reality' emerging from the participant can reduce the generalisability of research findings; as reality is regarded as subjective and varies from person to person, participants in research will not arrive at the same interpretations as researchers (Rolfe, 2006, p. 305). Scotland (2012, p. 12) contends that 'knowledge produced by the interpretive paradigm has limited transferability as it is usually fragmented and not unified into a coherent body'. The interpretivist is critiqued by those who find the existence of contradictory yet valid recollections of the same phenomenon to be misleading; they consider that a qualitative approach lacks sufficient rationale for the interpretation of data, and potentially enables researchers to assume an open and 'anything goes' relativist attitude (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2005, p. 378).

This research study derives from an interpretivist approach which recognises the researcher's part in the research subject, sharing a world view with a 'specific meaning and relevance structure for the beings living, acting, and thinking within it' (Schutz, 1962, p. 59).

4.2.4 Epistemology

Epistemology is concerned with the nature and forms of knowledge (Cohen, Manion, Morrison & Morrison, 2007) or 'how what is assumed to exist is known' (Blaikie, 2000, p. 8). Moreover, epistemological assumptions are concerned with knowledge about a social world, 'how knowledge can be created, acquired and communicated' (Scotland, 2012). The approach to knowledge is a keystone in the discussion of paradigms.

Crotty (2003) describes three epistemological approaches, Objectivist, Constructionist, and Subjectivist. Objectivist epistemology contends that meaning, and therefore, reality, exists apart and discrete from any consciousness. Constructionist epistemology by contrast, asserts the absence of any objective truth awaiting discovery. Subjectivist epistemology, a stance of post-modernism argues that meaning does not derive from an interplay of object and subject but rather is imposed on the object by the subject. Subjectivism, within epistemological inquiry, is the belief that knowledge is 'always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p. 21).

4.2.5 Ontology

A key element of the paradigmatic approach is ontology which is explained as *the study of being* (Crotty, 1998). Quinn Patton (2002) contends that 'constructivist philosophy is built on the thesis of ontological relativity, which holds that all tenable statements about existence depend on a worldview, and no worldview is uniquely determined by empirical or sense data about the world' (p. 97). Our realities are shaped by our interactions with others in society which, in turn, influences our understanding of the world. As such, the ontological approach used in this research is relativism, as reality is a socially negotiated process. This negotiated reality is also influenced by the subjective nature of the individual's own experience. Individual constructs are understood through interaction between researchers and participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 111), with participants being relied on as much as possible (Creswell, 2009, p. 8).

4.2.6 Conceptual Framework

The framework for this research involved what Creswell (2007) described as the 'entire process of research from conceptualising a problem to writing research questions and on to data collection, analysis, interpretation and report writing' (p.5). Miles and Huberman (1994) define a conceptual framework as 'a visual or written product that explains, either graphically or in narrative form, the main things to be studied' (p. 19). The same authors also suggest that a conceptual framework acts as an anchor for the data and serves the purpose of identifying study participants; describing the relationships and giving the opportunity for the researcher to generate constructs and categories. An initial conceptual framework for the case study is presented below in Fig. 4.2. This framework served as a visual reference for data collection and analysis.



Figure 4.2: Conceptual Framework

4.3 Phase 3 – The Research Theoretical Framework

4.3.1 Case Study

Qualitative research is underpinned by the assumption that human beings construct multiple realities when experiencing a phenomenon of interest; it posits that reality is not objective but rather formulated on a relativistic, constructivist ontology (Krauss, 2005). The primary objective of qualitative research is to facilitate the process of meaning-making as it aims to understand how meaning is allocated to various life events, people or objects. Two categories of significance emerged from Erikson (1963) when defining qualitative research: Common meanings and Unique Meanings. Thus, 'What has a common meaning to a group of people may have a unique meaning to an individual member of the group' (Krauss, 2005, p. 763).

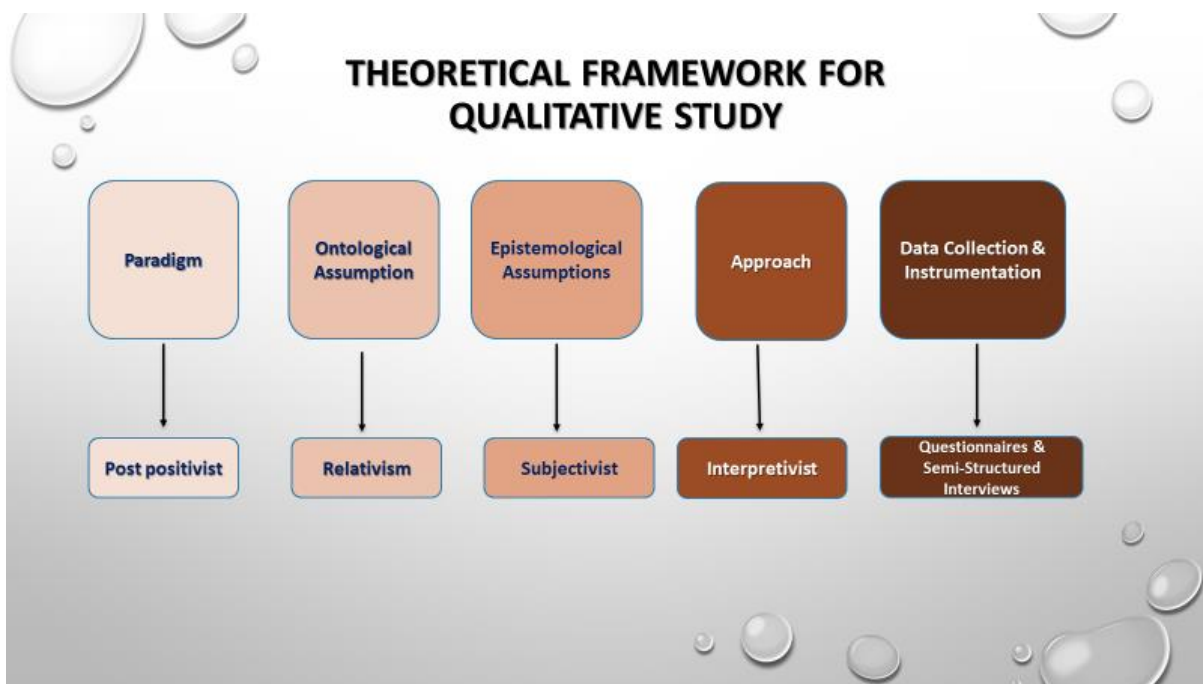


Figure 4.3: Theoretical Framework for Qualitative Study

4.3.2 Rationale and Assumptions underpinning the Methodology

The research question for this work is primarily concerned with the identification of priority Soft Skills for the future of work in the context of rapid change, environmental complexity, and uncertainty. It seeks to answer the 'what' question, thus aligning with the focus and purpose of

the exploratory case study.

Traditionally, organisational researchers have advocated for quantitative and objective approaches in conducting research; however, in recent years, the qualitative, subjectivist and individual approach to research has gained favour and recognition. Methodological directions are specific to an inductive, qualitative research approach, which include an understanding of the context; a limited subject sample and the use of a variety of data collection methods (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2003, p. 86). Central to this approach is establishing human actions within specific settings, and understanding the subject, motives, definitions, and purpose.

4.3. 3 Theoretical Lenses

This area of study is cross-disciplinary incorporating the fields of education (FET), psychology/neuroscience (Soft Skills) and Business (Future of Work) (see Figure 4.4 below).

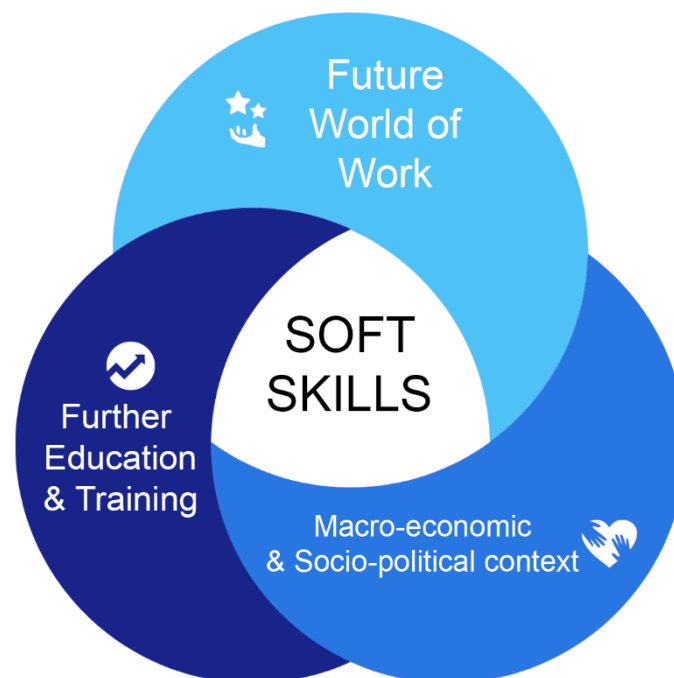


Figure 4.4: Cross-disciplinary domains

Therefore, a number of theoretical lenses inform the research. The educational theorist Vygotsky and Bandura (1977, 1978) underpin the social aspects of education' experiential learning of Dewey and Kolb (1987, 1997) and reflective practice of Schon and Moon (1987, 2010). From a business context perspective, the Socio-Technical Theory (Trist, 1981) which underpins the transition from Industry 4.0 to Industry 5.0, highlighted the change in human-machine interaction. Human Capital Theory is also relevant, highlighting the need for investment in human capital as a

production factor and investment in human resource as an asset forming part of the market value of the company (Kucharcikova, 2011).

From a psychological perspective, the principles of Emotional Intelligence and Social and Emotional Learning are relevant via the works of Salovey & Mayer (1997), Newman (2016), and Goleman (1985,2020).

4.3.4 Definitions of Case Study

Yin & David (2007) describe a case study as an in-depth investigation of contemporary phenomenon, utilising empirical methods and contend that it requires real world context, particularly if boundaries between context and phenomenon are not evident. Therefore, a case study is appealing to a researcher who seeks to understand a real-world case, presuming that to fully comprehend such a case will involve significant contextual conditions. 'Case study is a strategy for doing research which involves empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context using multiple sources of evidence' (Yin, 2009, p.18).

Merriam (1988) refines case study further in her definition: 'The qualitative case study can be defined as an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit. Case studies are particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic and rely heavily on inductive reasoning in handling multiple data sources' (p. 16). Methodological elements include addressing the 'technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points and as one result relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in triangulation, and as another result, benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis' (Yin, 2014, p. 17).

Gerring (2007) contended that, when '... in-depth knowledge of an individual example is more helpful than fleeting knowledge about a larger number of examples ... [and] we [can] gain better understanding of the whole by focusing on a key part ...' (p.1) a case study approach may be appropriate. It may not be as prevalent '... as experimental or quasi- experimental approaches to discovery, ...[however] advocates of the case study method suggest there are benefits to this method that typically explores small sample size populations in a deep fashion' (Pable, 2013. p. 70).

In a case study, data congruence is identified via triangulation. This is because this approach results in many more variables of interest than it does in data points. Therefore, theoretical propositions developed prior to one result are used as guiding sources for data collection, design

and analysis, for other results which may require multiple sources of evidence.

Therefore, case study research requires a layered definition, as a method of undertaking comprehensive modes of enquiry, with a unique, individual approach to design, data collection and data analysis.

4.3.5 Justification for Case Study

In terms of research reliability and accuracy, Tellis (1997) supported the case study approach as valid and reliable if the study was carried out correctly and the results derived would be generalizable. Yin and Stake (2015), and others who have wide experience in this methodology developed robust procedures for the implementation of case study within qualitative research. When these procedures are followed, 'the researcher will be following methods as well developed and tested as any in the scientific field . . .' (p. 1).

Over the last 30 years, Yin (2012) has been the most prominent figure in the argument of case study research as a robust methodology. His latest edition of case study research accounts for all advances made in the research study design, resulting in a definitive guide for undertaking this approach to methodology in a valid and reliable manner. Yin's primary goal was to improve 'our social science methods and practices over those of previous generations of scholars' (p. xxvi). Furthermore, he highlights this methodology as a 'linear but iterative process' (p. xxii).

4.3.6 Exploratory Case Study

Case Study Design

Once case study has been selected, Hancock & Algozzine (2011) identify that design considerations, including disciplinary orientation, type, and characteristics, should be determined and their appropriateness evaluated.

The ' . . . three major types of case study research design are exploratory, explanatory, and descriptive . . .' (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011, p. 37). Zainal (2007) concluded 'case studies explore and investigate contemporary real-life phenomenon through detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their relationships' (p. 2).

Exploratory case study attempts to answer questions typically framed by the pronoun 'what' (Yin, 2014). Case Study ' . . . seek[s] to define research questions of a subsequent study or to determine the feasibility of research procedures . . .' (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011, p. 37). It is ' . . . often a

prelude to additional research efforts . . .' (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011, p. 37) and does not necessarily need to be constrained by the case study model. The exploratory question can be addressed by any or all of the five research methods: (a) survey, (b) experiment, (c) archival analysis, (d) history, or (e) case study (Yin, 2014). Exploratory case study is used for this research because of its future focus and the opportunity to identify as recommendations, areas of further research on the broad cross-disciplinary topic.

4.4 Phase 4 – Data Collection & Analysis

4.4.1 Data Collection

Maykut and Morehouse (1994) highlight that the primary aim of qualitative research is in understanding an event as it is 'constructed by the participants', with a goal to record what people do and understand an individual's interpretation of the world (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994, p. 18). Data derived from questionnaires and interviews were coded under thematic analysis, with the authors maintaining 'the qualitative researcher or naturalistic inquirer is a part of the investigation as a participant observer, an in-depth interviewer, or a leader of a focus group but also removes him/herself from the situation to rethink the meanings of the experience' (p. 25). The choice of data collection methods was influenced by the need to capture the voice of the participant through interview and questionnaire feedback/data.

Consequently, this exploratory case study uses semi-structured interview, and questionnaire as the qualitative methods of data collection.

4.4.2 Sampling

Sampling examines the data collected based on relevance and aims to narrow down the data to be included in the research (Gibson and Brown, 2009). Purposeful sampling has been described by Quinn Patton (2002) as the 'method of selecting information-rich cases for study in depth' (p. 46), explaining that 'the power of purposeful sampling was the selection of information rich data cases. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry, thus the term purposeful sampling. Studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalisations' (p. 230). Quinn asserts that 'the logic and power of purposeful sampling derives from the emphasis on in-depth understanding' (p. 46). He suggests that qualitative research should be assessed on the basis of rationale and purpose of the study, with Lincoln and Guba (1985) highlighting redundancy as the main criterion: 'In purposeful sampling the size of the

sample is determined by informational considerations. If the purpose is to maximise information, the sampling is terminated when no new information is forthcoming from new sampled units; thus, redundancy is the primary criterion' (p. 202).

4.4.3 Overview of the Sample

Participants were selected using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling outlines the process of selecting research participants on the basis of their relevance to the research (Gibson & Brown, 2009). Prior to undertaking the coding, interview participants were divided into the respective categories and coded to enable the pursuance of the audit trail and clearly identify the source of commentary that would be outlined in the findings chapter.

The research sample for this study consists of 53 participants, 14 FET professionals (tutors and principals or department-heads within FET institutions) distributed across the various levels of FET provision in Ireland; 20 graduates recently employed and on a graduate programme, and 18 employers, FET providers or policy makers. Each participant was asked to either complete a questionnaire or take part in one interview of one-hour duration.

The research participants for this study comprise four different participant cohorts: 1) Employers, 2) FET Directors & Policymakers, 3) FET tutors, and 4) new entrant employees (graduates). This is a specific sample group and limited to 53 participants in total. However, it is a highly expert sample, specifically invited to participate because of the rich data they could provide. These four groups represent a broad range of experience and perspective. The aim is not to get consensus across all groups but rather identify overlap and alignment regarding Soft Skills needs (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1: *Outline of research sample and associated research method*

Category of Participant	Number <i>n</i> =	Instrument	Reference identifier
FET Tutor	<i>n</i> = 14	Questionnaire	FETQ
Graduate employees	<i>n</i> =20	Questionnaire	GRDQ
Employers/Associations	<i>n</i> =7	Interview	EI-01 to EI-07
FET Education Providers	<i>n</i> =7	Interview	PI-08 to PI-14 + PI-18
Policy makers & Organisations with a national remit	<i>n</i> =4	Interview	PO-15 to PO-17

4.4.4 Employer Cohort

The Employer cohort is a blend of Chief Human Resource Officers (CHRO's) and Chief Executive Officers (CEO's). CHRO's were favoured for participation over CEO's because CHRO's are those people most closely associated with determining the range of skills needed via workforce planning and establishing the skills pipeline for the workplace. They are required to anticipate skills needs and resource implications for the business based on their intimate knowledge of business strategy. These are also the people within the workplace who are conversant on Soft Skills at a deeper level and their expertise would yield richer data.

A specific and small sample of senior medical participants were consulted, with regard to this study, because, as providers of initial, postgraduate and professional education to the medical profession, there was a wealth of informed opinion and good practice relating to Soft Skills. In recognition of the need for upskilling in the area of Soft Skills within the medical profession, a new module was introduced into the initial medical curriculum in 2021, focusing on Self-awareness, Professional Identity and Resilience. This would be delivered throughout the 6-year initial medical course of study. This provided a unique opportunity to assess the rationale for inclusion of this module and the performance of this new module during the fieldwork for this study (see Table 4.2).

Table 4.2: Employer Cohort

CODE	FUNCTION	GENDER	EXPERIENCE	POSITION	SECTOR
EI-01	Employer/HR	Female	15yrs+	Snr. Mgt.	Medical
EI-02	Employer/HR	Female	8 yrs.	Mid. Mgt.	Professional Services
EI-03	Employer/HR	Male	15yrs+	Snr. Mgt.	Technology
EI-04	Employer/HR	Female	20yrs+	CEO	Industry Association
EI-05	Employer/HR	Female	20yrs+	Snr. Mgt.	Industry
EI-06	Employer/Provider	Male	20yrs+	CEO	Medical
EI-07	Employer/HR	Female	15yrs+	Director	Civil Service

4.4.5 Strategy & Policy Cohort

FET Directors and policymakers are those informed on FET reform and future policy orientation. This cohort of participants provided strategic perspective on new FET policy including the FET College of the Future strategy and the reconfiguration of levels 1-6 as foundational (levels 1-2) intermediate (levels 4-5) and bridging (levels 5-6). As this study is focused on the workplace, the focus within FET is on provision at levels 5 and 6 as these levels focus on progression, either to tertiary education or to the workplace (see Table 4.3).

Table 4.3: Strategy & Policy Cohort

CODE	FUNCTION	GENDER	EXPERIENCE	POSITION	SECTOR
PO-15	FET supports	Female	5yrs	Mid. Mgt.	Guidance
PO-16	Public Service Strategy & Policy	Female	10yrs+	Snr. Mgt.	Public Service body
PO-17	National FET Provider Body	Female	25yrs+	CEO	National FET Agency
PO-18	Provider FET Support	Female	20yrs+	Snr. Mgt.	National FET Agency

4.4.6 Provider Cohort

FET Tutors are those most informed on what actually happens in an FET classroom with regard to Soft Skills. FET tutors report lack of consultation, with regard to current reforms, and bring clarity to the role of the FET tutor and the somewhat precarious conditions under which they work. These are the people who are required to deliver reform on the ground and have much to say about the ambition of FET reform being built on such unstable and precarious foundations (see Table 4.4).

Table 4.4: FET Provider Cohort

CODE	FUNCTION	GENDER	EXPERIENCE	POSITION	SECTOR
PI-08	Provider	Female	5yrs	Tutor & Former FET Graduate	FET Partnership
PI-09	Public Service Education Support	Female	8 yrs.	Mid. Mgt.	National ED & FET Agency
PI-10	EU and National Education Policy	Female	15yrs+	Mid. Mgt.	National ED & FET Agency
PI-11	Provider	Female	20yrs+	Snr. Mgt.	Community Education & Youth
PI-12	Provider	Female	20yrs+	Snr. Mgt.	FET College
PI-13	Provider	Female	20yrs+	Director	FET College
PI-14	Provider	Female	20yrs+	Principal	FET College

4.4.7 Graduate Cohort

The new-entrant employee cohort is a group of 20 graduates attached to one professional services firm and with whom this researcher would work at intervals over a 12-month period. As the field work was carried out during Covid, it was fortunate to have access to these young people via an online platform. These graduates would provide recent information on the level of exposure they had to Soft Skills education across their entire education journey and offer their perspective on priority Soft Skills for work as new entrants. This group ranged in age-profile between 22 and 28 years of age (se Fig 4.5).

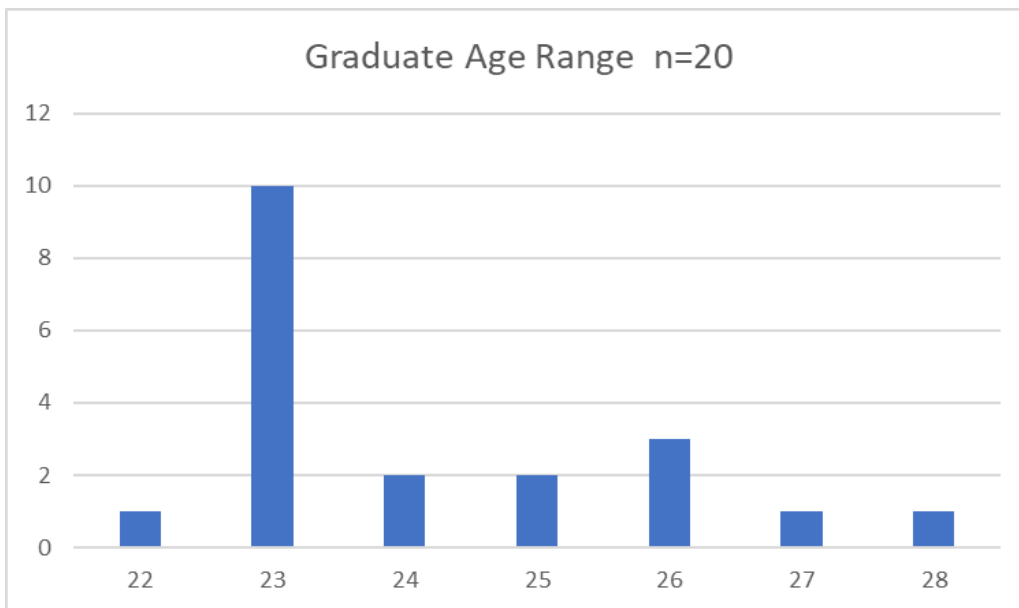


Figure 4.5: Graduate Age Range: n=20

4.4.8 Involvement in the Research Study

Participants were requested to take part in a semi-structured interview which was recorded on Zoom, as the field work was taking place during the pandemic lockdown. Every effort was made to accommodate the scheduling requirements of the participants and minimise any disruption to their lives and work. As evident in Table 4.1, selected cohorts of the research target groups were requested to complete a questionnaire, namely, graduates and FET professionals. FET professionals are also referred to as tutors and these are the people teaching in FET colleges around the country. The research practice conformed to all applicable legislation including the Freedom of Information Act, and the Data Protection Act. All personal information remains confidential and anonymous and is preserved solely for use in the development of this ED Doc thesis. All data is maintained on a password protected USB for one year only.

Initial contact was made by email, to allow adequate time for reflection and considered response following which interviews were scheduled at a location of mutual consent at a time of the participants' choosing. Participant confidentiality and anonymity was assured, and names were not recorded at any stage in the data collection process. Codes were used in both the transcribing of interviews and writing of the research report. All interview recordings – video interviews- were carried out on Zoom were maintained on a secure, password protected device in a secure location together with all hard-copy documentation. All electronic files were password protected and kept on a desktop PC and backed up on USB stored in a secure location.

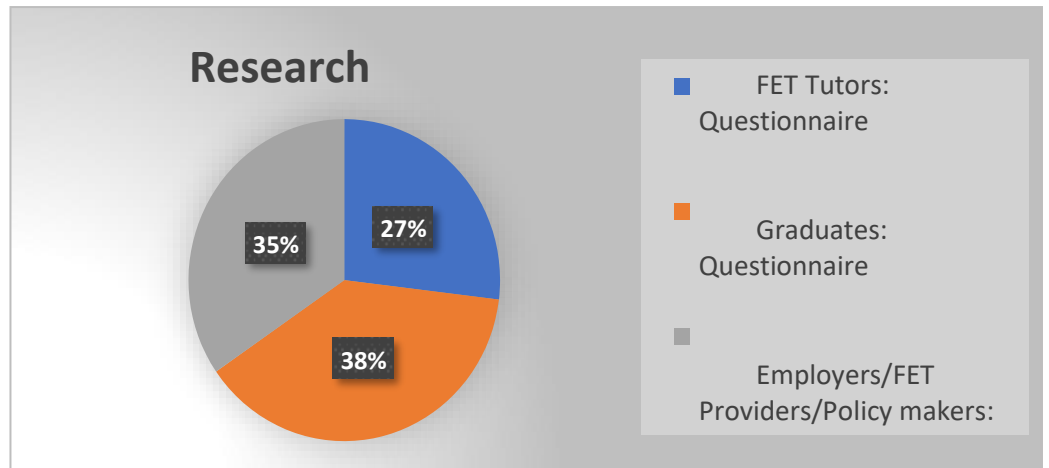


Figure 4.6: *Distribution of research participant type.*

4.5 Data Collection Methods

4.5.1 Interviews

According to O’Leary (2004), interviews are structured, unstructured, or semi-structured and require the interviewer to ask questions which are open-ended in nature, enabling more extended data collection. She highlights that when undertaking an explorative study, structured interviews provide limited data, referring to them as a verbal questionnaire. O’Leary also contends that unstructured interviews, though more difficult to manage, offer greater insight into explorative subjects with which the researcher may be unfamiliar. She further points out that the unstructured interview can prove useful for studying the experience of a phenomenon.

Yin (2014) states that interviews are ‘an essential source of case study evidence because most case studies are about human affairs or actions’ (p.113). Semi structured interviews allow the participants to speak freely around certain topics or themes that have been identified by the researcher. The flexibility this approach offers also ‘allows for the discovery or elaboration of information that is important to participants but may not have previously been thought of as pertinent by the research team’ (Gill et al., 2008). Semi structured interviews frequently begin with a more defined and planned approach to questioning but as the interview progresses, this approach allows the interviewee to elaborate in a manner which feels most natural for them; the interview then adopts this conversational flow.

According to Alvesson (2003), interviews are 'better viewed as the scene for a social interaction rather than a simple tool for collection of data' (p.169). Semi-structured interviews were undertaken in an attempt to gain greater insight into the understanding of Soft Skills and the views of stakeholders on the acquisition, understanding, and assessment of Soft Skills in different settings. Charmaz (2006) highlights that interviews can range from a lightly structured exploration of certain themes to more focused, semi- structured questions.

Creswell (2013) notes that individual interviews involve the collection of data from one participant at a time and Patton (2002) highlights the need to follow an interview guide to ensure each interview followed the same lines of enquiry. He suggests that preparation of questions enables the researcher to maintain focus and clarity throughout the interview process, thus enabling the interviewee to respond in an appropriate manner. Questions asked were broad in scope and ranged from knowledge questions to feeling questions, to opinion and value questions and finally experience questions (See Appendix B for the Interview Guide).

Semi-structured interviews were chosen because 'a semi-structured protocol has the advantage of asking all informants the same core questions with the freedom to ask follow up questions that build on the responses received' (Brenner, 2006, p.363).

Hour-long interviews were conducted across three categories of professional: Employers; Education & Training Providers and Policy makers & associations. The aim was to capture the myriad voices relating to the research area. The Interview sought to obtain expert input from the participants. Interviewees were provided with the consent form and a copy of the questions for consideration. Video interviews took place over Zoom because of Covid constraints and were recorded. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) claimed the qualitative interview '*reflected the interpretivist paradigm that logic flows from specific to general and that knower and known cannot be separated because the subjective knower is the only source of reality*' (p. 14).

4.5.2 Interviewee Sample Profile

Seventeen interviews were conducted. Each interview was approximately one-hour in duration. Interviewees were classified into three different categories: Employers (7), Education & Training Providers (7) and Strategy Officers (3). 12% of interviewees (2) were male and the rest, female. Experience in their respective fields ranged between 8 and 25 years.

The employer sample consisted of Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and Chief Human Resources Officers (CHRO's) and Learning & Development managers all of whom could identify and confirm

current and future skills needed in their organisations.

Provider interviewees consisted of FET senior teachers or principals and policy respondents were from organisations and associations with a national remit and policy focus.

One set of interviewees crossed the employer-provider divide by being both an employer and training provider, specifically, in the Health Sector i.e., initial education and training for the medical profession. They were chosen specifically to record new thinking and innovative approach to curriculum development for initial medical training.

4.5.3 Questionnaire

Questionnaires present the opportunity for opinions, or attitudes of a population to be expressed in numeric terms (Creswell, 2014). Quinn Patton (2002) asserts that qualitative research 'aims to minimise the imposition of predetermined responses when gathering data' (p. 353). Therefore, it is essential for the interviewer to ensure that their questions are open ended so as respondents elaborate in their own words. Silverman (2014) also notes that a strength of quantitative data is in 'revealing 'inputs' and 'outputs' of particular phenomena while qualitative data can reveal how social phenomena work in real time' (2014, p. 46).

Jansen (2010) highlights that the qualitative questionnaire aims to determine the diversity of a certain topic of interest in a given sample. It is not concerned with establishing frequencies and does not aim to measure the amount of people with common characteristics but rather looks to find the meaningful variation within the sample studied.

Questionnaires were issued to two different participant cohorts. This mode of questionnaire was deemed to be reliable and secure, protecting participant anonymity and would be quick and efficient to administer and manage. The FET tutor questionnaire was piloted with a small sample of experienced FET tutors who were asked to feedback any comments. One person relayed some small edits to enhance clarity. Otherwise, all tutors reported positive feedback about the questionnaire and the focus of the questions. These edits were made before issuing the questionnaire to the wider audience. Questionnaires were issued to a) graduates entering employment with 80% of the graduates employed on a graduate programme and b) Further Education & Training Tutors.

4.5.4 Questionnaire FET Tutor Sample Profile

Fourteen FET tutors and/or college principals were asked to complete the questionnaire.

Questions focused on the nature and extent to which Soft Skills were taught within the current QQI modules levels 1-6. Questions also aimed to establish the levels of support and training provided to FET tutors in order to undertake the Soft Skills training that is highlighted in the most recent FET policy (20-24). Tutors were also asked to consider how the FET system would need to evolve in order to deliver Soft Skills to the appropriate level that would meet employer needs.

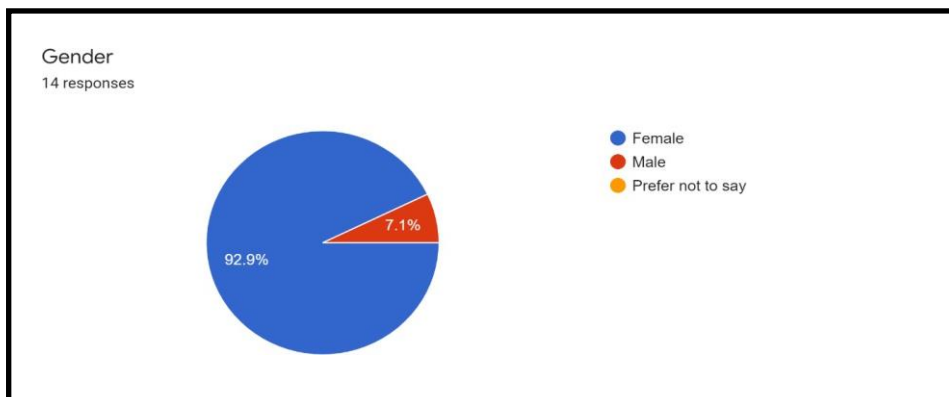


Figure 4.7: FET tutor respondent gender distribution

4.5.5 Questionnaire Graduate Sample Profile

The questionnaire captures the views of graduates newly appointed to their role during the Covid pandemic. All 20 respondents were working remotely, and some had not been present in the office of their new employment since the inception of the Graduate programme. These graduates were asked questions pertaining to defining Soft Skills and the level of exposure to Soft Skills education or training during the second level of higher education to Soft Skills development. They were also asked to identify what they considered to be the priority skills needed for their new role in a new 'remote' context.

The Questionnaires were distributed using Google Forms and consisted of five sections with questions using open, closed and ranking formats. The questionnaires addressed the following (see Table 4.6 and Appendix C).

Table 4.5: Outline and Structure of Questionnaires for FET tutors & Graduates

	FET Tutor Questionnaire	Graduate Questionnaire
Section 1	Introduction & Consent	Introduction & Consent
Section 2	Biographical Information: Role and location in the FET system	Biographical Information: Level of education Subject/course of study
Section 3	Qualification/experience/specific training for the delivery of Soft Skills	Understanding of Soft Skill Locus of any exposure/teaching of Soft Skills in school or college Participation in Erasmus+
Section 4	Confidence in teaching Soft Skills; Understanding, definition Levels of CPD provided for Soft Skills Most/least important Soft Skills	Understanding Soft Skills and their utility in the workplace Ranking soft skill in importance Linking to behaviour
Section 5	FET system: Locus within the system of Soft Skills Provision within QQI modules Nature of systemic change needed	Identifying and ranking Soft Skills Link to personality

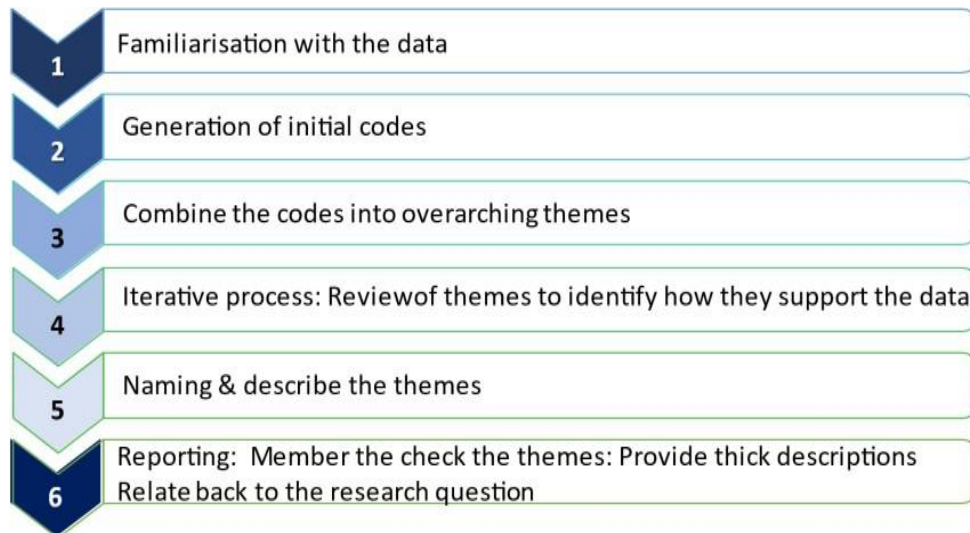
(See Appendix C for the Questionnaires)

4.6 Phase 5 – Interpretation

4.6.1 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) developed by Braun & Clarke (2006) was used as a mode of analysis for this study. TA is regarded as a method rather than a methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013), meaning that it is not fixed to a particular epistemological or theoretical perspective. It has been defined by Braun and Clarke (2012) as *'a method for identifying, organising, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set'* (p.57).

Central analytical steps undertaken are to recognize the data content, reduce redundancy and to accumulate the data into categories relating to a specific social phenomenon (Aguinaldo, 2012). There is a lack of clarity regarding the nature of TA and its distinction from content analysis (Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2013) as the search for themes is an action in many forms of qualitative data analysis (Bryman, 2016). Notwithstanding the limitations associated with TA and the dependency on presentation of themes by participant quotes as the primary form of analysis, the six-phase analytical strategy as outlined by Braun and Clarke is applied (2006) as follows: .



Braun & Clarke, 2006

Figure 4. 8: Six phase analytical strategy (Braun and Clarke, 2006)

One of the main strengths of TA lies in its flexibility and its suitability for use across a range of methods and disciplines. It is important to follow the six stages outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), so as to avoid analysis that is too loose and superficial. They further emphasise the importance of rigour in the analytic process and stress the need for researchers to approach TA in a manner that is transparent and inclusive.

Reflexivity is also highlighted as a necessary practice in the application of TA and researchers are urged to reflect on their own work, their own position in the analytic process and be transparent about their assumptions and overall approach.

Braun and Clarke (2006) identify two levels of themes: semantic and latent. Semantic pertains to what they describe as ‘surface meanings of the data’ (p, 84), and latent refers to the deeper underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations and ideologies. TA was selected as the mode of data analysis for this study because of the clarity of its approach and the iterative and organic

approach to thematic identification. When applied with due care and enables a deep engagement with the data.

4.6.2 Data Coding

The researcher used a grounded theory lens to code the data with no preconceptions. Gibbs (2007) points out that proponents of the Grounded Theory approach when approaching coding of data explain that 'one should try to pull out from the data what is happening and not impose an interpretation based on pre-existing theory' (p.9). Consequently, the data was analysed using a Grounded Theory coding method as a structured framework within the thematic analysis phases two and three of Braun and Clarke's analytical strategy (2006). Cullen and Brennan (2021) state that the 'original proponents, Glaser & Strauss (1967) define grounded theory as the discovery of theory from data. Corbin & Strauss (2008) describe grounded theory as denoting theoretical constructs derived from qualitative analysis'. Charmaz, through her modification of the grounded theory to Constructivist Grounded Theory begins her analysis from the participants point of view to form an 'empathetic understanding to discover how people construct their lives and why they act as they do' (Charmaz, 2011, p. 292). Manual coding was decided upon as the most appropriate method and mode for data analysis using Excel as the software for documenting and organising codes (see Appendix D).

4.6.3 Open coding

Open coding is a grounded theory method for qualitative data analysis and is applied as a grounded theory lens to this qualitative research. Data is observed and codes are attached to name or describe the phenomenon to be considered; the data is then divided into meaningful expressions, described in a few words, with further codes attached to the resulting expressions (Flick, 2009).

Charmaz (2020, p.173) contends that 'the stated purpose of grounded theory is conceptualising and theorising knotty problems in the empirical world'. In Grounded Theory, open coding is the first examination of the data in order to generate codes, axial coding is the next phase which links the codes together and selective coding the identification of a central code that captures the essence of your findings (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Open coding is applied in the initial phase of data analysis. It aims to derive new concepts or theories from the data as opposed to analysing if an existing theory appears in the data. i.e., it keeps an open mind to all theoretical possibilities. The data is broken down into sections to allow for comparison and contrast of findings. Fig. 4.9 and 4.10 Samples of Coding and Reflective Journal

4.6.4 Axial Coding

'Axial coding is a qualitative research technique that involves relating data together in order to reveal codes, categories, and subcategories ground within participants' voices within the collected data. It is a way to create links between data' (Scott & Medaugh, Sage Publications, 2017).

Axial coding is the second phase of grounded theory, where connections between codes are drawn. It aims to categorise the codes and underlying data. Themes which emerged in the previous phase of open coding that are most important and align with the theory are identified; similar concepts are grouped together under one code and categorised to further organise the research. The categories which are identified are axis around which those supporting codes revolve.

4.6.5 Selective Coding

Selective coding involves delimiting coding to only those variables that relate to the core variable in sufficiently significant ways to produce a theory. This research uses a grounded theory approach within thematic analysis to ensure that themes are emergent and grounded in the data. This approach does not restrict the thematic findings to one central code; rather it uses the three stages solely to structure the coding within thematic analysis and allow the findings to emerge.

Excerpt from Reflective Journal Q1: 2022

As I revise the data AGAIN to ensure a clear audit trail, I'm learning that my 'intuitive' nature causes me to want to jump over the data and go directly to *interpretation*. I've had to adopt the position of *strange eyes* – to ensure that my analysis is comprehensible to someone not as close to the work as I am.

I have been immersed in this subject for many years – via – non-formal methodology; working with young people; facilitation; people development in the workplace – always looking, I hope, beyond the obvious; looking in the behavioural sciences literature to explain why and how we are different. I have been around this topic for many years and have seen the whole subject area track from indifference to lip-service, to, finally, some degree of recognition within the workplace.

Heretofore, the focus in work was on the task – get it done whatever the cost. Many employees would have indicated to me that the trade-off was actually too great and more than they were prepared to 'pay'. This has become more pronounced during and post Covid – represented in part by the WEF have termed – The Great Resignation. People have had first hand experience of living and working in a different way and they are now curious to see how this 'remote' work model could prevail.

People are starting to grab the Soft Skills agenda – especially FET. The concept of Transversal Skills or Meta Skills is in the new FET policy. There is a concern however, that it is treated as a skills-set to be 'grafted on' to the existing modules rather than a more radical curriculum re-design to embed this type of skills development.

Figure 4.9: Sample Reflective Journal

Paragraph	Paragraph	Paragraph	Paragraph
I think for all we have embraced, we'll say, technology people who were very discomfited by it at the beginning have made the leap, you know, come earlier than others, but eventually who've made the leap. They've gone way out of their comfort zone and they are well-skilled in the whole use of technology. And that would be a good thing.	In the context of Covid, all have had to embrace technology. Even those who are uncomfortable by tech have made the leap. People out of comfort zone and well-skilled as a result. A good thing.	Covid caused technology embrace for everyone. Those who are uncomfortable have also made the leap. Huge upskilling as a result of Covid - not easy but good.	Rapid acquisition of tech skills for everyone driven by Covid. Everyone made the Leap.
For all the technology and all the money that was invested in it and all the different platforms that people have been expected to it hasn't in any way compensated for the lack of the live environment, face-to-face interaction. And it's the social cues.	In spite of all investment in tech platforms, it hasn't compensated for the face-to-face environment. The difference between online & face to face lies in the social cues.	All tech investment and migration to online has not compensated for face to face environment. Online vs face-to-face is because of the social cues. Value of the random interaction - in person.	No substitute for in-person environment. Social cues are the difference between online and in-person.
What we're all calling the water cooler moments. Even if you're not talking it's other communication pieces, and there is something lost in this, you know, very deliberate way of interacting with someone.	Name given to the face to face random interaction. Face to face environment even if not talking - other communication going on. Something is lost in the online environment.	Connection lost in the online environment. Random non-verbal communication still ahead of online environment.	
When you're physically sitting in a room with someone you have to sit and listen to them and talk to them. When people are on these things they're sending a couple of texts, they might have a texted screen, every now and again you'll see their eyes darting here and there.	When in the presence of someone, you have to listen and pay attention. When online, people can send texts, be distracted and doing other work. Not fully present. People online - no always committed to the interaction - doing other things. Online interaction carries some risk in terms of communication impact.	Focus of attention different when in the presence of someone. Distraction of online. Online allows people to disengage. Communications risk in the online environment.	better listening is required when in-person. Comm in the online environment.
People are doing other things, they're not necessarily committed to the interaction. There's a bit more noise for it - it's riskier for want of a better way, it's a risky kind of an environment, because even in this translation things are lost. They're lost in a way that you can kind of soften it if you're physically in the room together or -	Online loses the opportunity to moderate communication - can soften tone if in the presence of the other person. Online comes also compressed by only have the small visual frame.	Can't easily moderate comms in the online environment. More modulation of the tone possible in the in person environment.	
And the other thing is you see this in a frame. You don't see the whole person.	What are soft skills - the capabilities to do the human elements of work. Whether interaction or skills - they're soft not hard skills. Hard skills more transactional, task focused with hard produce as output.	SS are the human elements of work. Hard skills more transactional focused on output.	Constituent element of Soft Skills. Contrast with hard skills.
I think they are the capabilities to do the human elements of work, work in its broadest terms that's interaction or skills. So, you know, like, you might say what are soft skills? Well, they're not the hard skills. But you might look at hard skills in terms of things being sort of task-based and you're talking transactional, with a product or a hard output at the end of it.	Soft skills are the pieces that bring the humanity. AI big on everyone's agenda but never going to fully take over the entirety of any role. Soft skill - the social aspect, intuition and human factors. Pre-Covid, launched a report Collins & McMackin on role of L&D in workplace of the future. Focus was to find direction and purpose of L&D in digital age. Covid caused reactivity in leadership that characterised by fast decision-making based in fear. Leaders looking to L&D for solutions.	SS are the human elements of work. AI - bit on the agenda. Pre-Covid Collins & McMackin - published L&D for the future of work. Report on L&D in future workplace. L&D will need purpose redefined in digital age. HR/L&D in digital age - repurposed. Covid impact on leadership. Leaders looking for L&D solutions.	Human elements. Can't mimic or overtake the human element. HR/L&D in digital age - repurposed.

Figure 4.10: Sample Data Coding

4.6.6 Triangulation

Triangulation refers to the confluence of information emerging from a case study; it breaks down data from the myriad data sources to reveal a consistent finding. In qualitative research, triangulation can be undertaken by the researcher, participant, or methodological theory. In this study, participant triangulation was researched and achieved through the examination of data from the varied participant perspectives captured through the research sample of tutors, graduates, policy makers, and employers. Carter et al. (2014) explain that 'Data source triangulation involves the collection of data from different types of people, including individuals, groups, families, and communities, to gain multiple perspectives and validation of data' (p.545).

4.7 Ethics and Duty of Care

All ethical protocols were followed in carrying out this research. An application to the DCU ethics committee was submitted and approved. Letters of invitation to participate in the research included an informed consent and plain language statement that provided information to the participant on their right to refuse or exit the research process at any time. (See Appendix A). Powney and Watts (1987) explained the benefit of research participant consent 'research benefits from interviewees being fully informed from the start of what the researchers and the interviewees are trying to establish' (p.147). Participants completing the questionnaires were provided with a Plain Language Statement explaining the nature of the research and the expectations of their role within it. The Plain Language Statement provided important clarification as to the use of their data and how long it would be retained. Participants are informed about their rights as a participant. They were also asked to confirm their informed consent when completing the questionnaire. Participants were informed that data would be held securely and accessed only by the researcher and that data would be destroyed on completion of the research process. See Appendix A.

The transcriber for the interviews signed a Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA) for the purposes of confidentiality and all files handed over to the researcher and deleted from the transcriber's computer. No records were kept by the transcriber. Upon the completion of the research, all records will be destroyed in accordance with data protection regulations.

The ethical issues pertaining to practitioner as researcher have been dealt with earlier in this chapter - 4.1 Role of the Researcher - which addresses the role of the researcher practitioner and outlines the ethical implications and considerations necessary to the integrity of the research process. Actions are outlined above that were taken to ensure that the questions were value free

and clear of any confirmation bias and reflexivity was practiced at all stages of the process.

4.8 Limitations

Yin (2013) states that small-scale research cannot produce generalisable outcomes because the sampling is specific and not representative of the whole population. Given the specificity of the sample connected to this study which was dependent on access to participants, willingness to become involved and timing, across the period of Covid lockdown, the results cannot be generalised. However, the study has provided in-depth, context specific material and rich datasets to explore the views of participants from the worlds of work and education. The study also provides some clarity to the confusion that exists within the topic and offers a holistic definition. According to Yin, (2013), this research can be characterised as ‘analytic generalisation’ meaning that comparative analysis can be carried out between the findings of this study and other prior research (p. 325).

The participant sample for this research thesis could be broadened to include specific stakeholder and decision-making actors using different lenses such as micro, macro, meso levels of influence. Further research could focus on reaching consensus on the identification and prioritisation of Soft Skills in specific sectors and the challenges for each sector in teaching, training and assessing these skills.

There were some limitations to the level of gender balance within the participant cohorts specifically with regard to FET tutors. In part these challenges can be attributed to the gender makeup of FET staff (74% Female, SOLAS, p.7) and also to challenges recruiting participants potentially due to the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on staff availability.

4.9 Conclusion

The research paradigm and rationale for the methods and methodology deployed in this study, which sought to identify priority Soft Skills for the future of work, have been outlined. This chapter has examined the theoretical perspective, epistemological and ontological viewpoint, and methodological approach used in this research. It has further elaborated on the participant sampling method, data collection tools, and data analysis.

The research methods utilised were considered reliable and appropriate for this research process and population. Ethical considerations that included the role of the researcher practitioner and researcher positionality have been discussed and reflexivity considered in this context. The need for ethical considerations at all stages of the research process has been recognised and the

limitations of the study outlined. The next chapter will present the findings from the thematic analysis of the research data.

Chapter 5: Findings

The findings outlined in this chapter emerged from the analysis of the data set of 34 questionnaires and 18 interviews of one-hour duration. The research participant sample was selected to capture as broad a voice as possible and included Employers - Human Resources or Learning & Development departments of small-to-medium-sized Enterprises (SME's); - Further Education & Training Providers, Higher Education Providers, FET policy makers, Professional associations, FET Tutors, and Graduates (Graduates were in year one of full-time employment on a graduate programme).

The findings are presented from thematic analysis of the full data set from employers, FET tutors, FET policy participants, and graduates, and are presented under the following themes:

Nomenclature, Priority Soft Skills for the Future Workplace, and Teaching of Soft Skills within FET.

In order to continue the narrative arc of this thesis, the findings will be presented in alignment with the focus of the research questions.

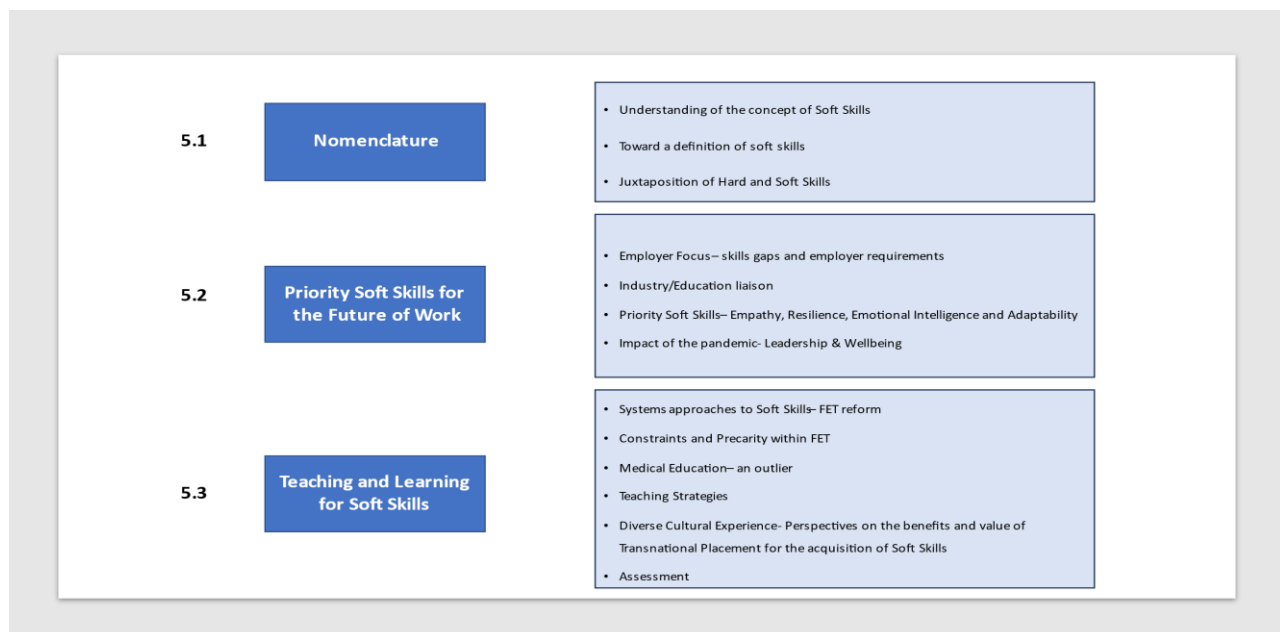


Figure 5.1: Overview of Findings

5.1 Nomenclature

Nomenclature is the collective term given to the myriad names, labels, and identifiers that are attributed to Soft Skills. The difference in labelling is dependent on context. For example, *Transversal Skills* is used specifically in Further Education and Training (FET), whereas Soft Skills is used more in the corporate environment. The participants' reaction to the term "Soft Skills" is also captured in this section.

The majority of those interviewed, regardless of category, took issue with the term "Soft Skills". The considered opinion was that this term 'soft' devalued the skills in some way. It was seen as unhelpful, unclear, and even contradictory. *'I think the language is interesting because even when I hear the term 'Soft Skills' I sort of bristle. My work is in this space, and I think Soft Skills almost diminish the value of what they are' [EI-01]*. Some participants appear to have an emotional reaction to the term: *'I hate the way they use the term 'soft skill' [PI-10]*.

In the youth sector and non-formal educational settings, the term 'Soft Skills' is not used at all. This word is replaced variably by *'Power Skills', 'Life Skills', 'Professional Skills',* or *'Personal Development'*. Organisations that supported people to acquire skills relevant to work indicated that they considered the term "Soft Skills" to be *'too deep' [PI-08]* and potentially frightening for learners. They preferred to introduce material on Soft Skills under the title *"Tips for Improving Confidence"*. The confusion around the meaning and scope of the term Soft Skills is reflected in this interviewee's words: *'I don't like the term 'Soft Skills' either. I was going to say life skills, but it's not life skills either because ...it is, and it isn't...' [PI-08]*.

Soft Skills were referred to in different ways and many grappled with attempting to describe what constitutes Soft Skills. There were myriad names or titles given as a substitute for the term Soft Skills. Most respondents/interviewees experienced more challenges around the term 'soft' rather than 'skills.'

'It's called core skills, it's called basic skills, it's called transversal skills. I don't believe the term 'Soft Skills' does justice because it makes it sounds like something that is almost disposable, not really required. It's not 'hard' enough to have recognition' [PO-17].

The term 'Transversal Skills' had more currency and found greater favour in the FET context, in that it provided a space for these types of skills to develop. It *'traverses'* [EI-05] other skills development areas and was thought to be somewhat more agile. Basic skills were an alternative term that was seen to further devalue these skills which are the very opposite of basic. Indeed, they were regarded, by some respondents, as high-order skills. The main resistance registered towards transversal skills, as a term, lay in the degree of its orientation to the workplace: *'Soft*

Skills is talked about as transversal, but it's very much orientated in terms of the workplace'[PI-10].

The variation in nomenclature and the response to the terminology appears to be related to the purpose of education with some participants asserting that the purpose of education is broader than providing a skills pipeline for the workplace. Furthermore, this tension between hard and Soft Skills was seen as a reference specific to the workplace. This also raised the issue of how Soft Skills were valued and validated: *'I suppose it comes back to the purpose of education and learning in the first place being broader than the workplace. So, it only becomes a problem when it's not relating to the workplace'* [PI-10].

A youth worker pointed out that in the non-formal education sector the terminology is different:

'I don't do the differentiation. I call it a skill. I call it a tool. I call it a practice, a methodology, an approach. And like I work a lot with students, and we talk about professional skills development' [PI-11].

A policy-focused participant indicated that their interest in this research related to the importance of this particular topic and lamented the inappropriate nature of the nomenclature and the lack of visibility for these skills: *'I mean, if one thing you could do through your research is if we could somehow get a different word than 'soft'—for what this actually is and what it means to people and what it does for people and where it could take people that would be amazing'*[PO-16].

5.1.1 Towards a definition

Participants were asked what they understood Soft Skills to be as a means of obtaining a range of understanding that could then be potentially synthesised into a definition. All interview participants focused on behavioural elements and highlighted the importance of awareness as fundamental. Two employer participants, with strong HR experiences but working into very different sectors, concurred that:

'Quite simply, Soft Skills are the interpersonal and behavioural elements to the skills needed to be successful in a role'[EI-01].

'Enduring Capabilities' was offered as a title currently utilised by some technology employers [EI-03].

'And I actually think a lot of it is awareness. But then also giving them the tools to spot, you know, if there's issues in the team' [EI-02].

With regard to Leadership, high levels of Soft Skills was seen as the differentiator for great leadership, the starting point for which is self-knowledge and awareness of the associated internal journey. Intrapersonal skills were highlighted repeatedly as priority by those who made the

inter/intrapersonal distinction. These respondents also included specific elements such as: ‘self-knowledge, awareness, having a moral centre, ethical behaviour and genuine compassion’ [EI-06]. and ‘...have a better understanding and awareness of yourself and the work that you do and how it impacts others’ [EI-07]. A key factor related to the individual: ‘But the starting point is the self-knowledge. So, we then start to go into the internal journey and, you know, your leadership as your autobiography’[EI-03].

A broad range of skills were reported as Soft Skills by all participants. The range of skills is listed here in descending order of importance and will be discussed in the next chapter.

Table 5.1: Priority Soft Skills per research cohort

Interviewees	Graduates (Questionnaire)	FET Tutors (Questionnaire)
Empathy	Adaptability	Listening
Communications	Resilience	Self-awareness
Resilience	Listening	Optimism
Adaptability	Self-awareness/confidence	Empathy
Emotional Intelligence	Empathy	

Empathy, compassion, and wellbeing were strongly linked to self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-belief: ‘There’s something in my head linked to compassion. I guess that’s so closely linked to empathy. ...like the whole idea of self-compassion, wellbeing—because to me they’re very closely linked to things like self-esteem as well and self-confidence and self-belief’ [PI-08]. An attempt to define empathy was described as an ability to ‘.....get to know others and walk in other people’s shoes’ [PI-11].

Adaptability was identified as a key soft skill, driven by the fast-changing nature of the workplace and the need for people to be positively oriented to new tasks. Absorbing and managing change was identified as the primary soft skill: ‘So, the point is that this—I think the biggest difficulty and the biggest challenge is that everything is changing at a faster rate that absorbing change perhaps is the ultimate soft skill now’ (EI-03).

According to one education provider interviewee, the establishment of trust and increased confidence enabled a conversation to be had – especially with marginalised learners – about their own development needs: ‘And once they trust-build and confidence-build then people

will begin to show—what needs they have. I mean, maybe not in saying, ‘I have these needs,’ but maybe the conversation will be started to develop further’ [PI-08].

Listening -active and passive -communication skills, teamwork, and resilience were also included in responses related to what is understood by Soft Skills. A definition offered was: *‘All of those skills that enable people engage in whatever activity, be it learning or work, you know, to sustain it and to engage it’ [PO-17].*

An FET respondent attributed a more intentional approach to Soft Skills, indicating that skills like listening, empathy, engagement, and resilience all now have a commodity status: *‘I believe we’ve put a more intentional spin on it, that these things like listening and engagement and empathy and understanding and resilience and stamina are now a commodity’ [PO-17].*

Several interviewees identified ‘Empathy’ as a priority soft skill. Some questioned whether or not it could be called a soft skill at all, linking it more strongly as a value. There were several instances across the discussions where the notion of values and Soft Skills became intertwined. Empathy was also explained by its associated demonstration, for example, by good communication and interaction with others. This also gave rise to a consideration of empathy as a competence rather than a skill, recognising the nature of understanding and knowledge that accompanies the development of a competency:

‘So, the first one that comes into my mind, and I’m not sure if everyone will call it a skill, but the word that comes to my mind is ‘empathy’. But the skill that it’s linked to is communication, interacting with others. It links to understanding. So, there’s a knowledge part of it there as well’ [PI-11].

In the context of FET provision, career management skills were identified as being of core importance right through the system, from QQI levels one through six. This incorporated all aspects of Soft Skills including self-awareness, self-development, capacity development and developing self- concept and an understanding of where they *‘fit in’*. For vulnerable or marginalised learners, the benefit of Soft Skills was that they enabled the courage to try new things:

‘So, what I’m talking about there is self-direction, self-confidence, and the capacity for independent learning. Learners who were vulnerable, the Soft Skills that they need essentially to do with moving away from the security blanket’ [PO-15].

Community activation and self-efficacy were deemed to be positive outcomes of soft skill acquisition, demonstrated by people feeling better about themselves. This was seen as the driver for transformation. Empathy, relationship building, and network building all combine to constitute

core competencies of Emotional Intelligence which are differentiators for good leadership: 'So, competencies like empathy would be very important, relationship skills, building strong networks' 'I suppose we would refer to it more as your leadership and professional skills' [EI-02]. Another attempt at a broader definition was: 'So, for me it's anything that's not technical skills in nature' [EI-02].

From the employer perspective, a broader definition was offered, covering behaviours such as manners and personal presentation and the ability to make an impact. 'Cop-on' here refers to emotional intelligence:

'Soft Skills: basically, cop on, common sense, good manners, ability to engage, talk to people, behave appropriately, present themselves properly whether that's written or oral or whatever way, and it's the ability possibly even to make an impression' [EI- 05].

Guidance professionals interpret Soft Skills as conscious or unconscious capacities that are tied to the capacity or competency in their role: '...I think that anyone in a Guidance context will interpret Soft Skills as being a range of [.....] capacities that a person has or has developed which are tied into their capacity or their competencies...' [PO-15]. One guidance professional contends that 'Soft Skills' were very often overlooked in the context of adults who may be described as early school leavers, linking their self-concept to a less than optimal experience in formal education. From a guidance perspective, the constituent elements of Soft Skills relate to Emotional Intelligence (EQ) and Openness to Learning: 'it relates to things, for example, like emotional intelligence, distance intelligence, well say, or even confidence. As a most fundamental thing Soft Skills management is hugely connected to confidence and openness to learning' [PO-15].

According to one participant who operates in a policy environment, a "Soft Skills" definition is considered and defined within the context of accreditation. This means that only those Soft Skills which are currently taught within QQI modules are considered. This view is highlighted by a provider who contended that 'what is assessed drives what is taught in the classroom' [PI- 13].

5.1.2 Juxtaposition Hard vs Soft Skills

Soft Skills are considered and discussed across the data and the literature review most frequently situated either contrary to, complementary to or in conjunction with, hard skills. Both employers and providers especially consider this juxtaposition to be unhelpful and devaluing of Soft Skills.

All interview participants, irrespective of role or setting, defined hard skills as those technical or technological skills needed to do the job. Soft Skills were repeatedly positioned and discussed by employers in relation to hard skills. Employers considered that Soft Skills were interdependent

and complementary to hard skills; that there was a blurring of lines between hard and Soft Skills at organisational level. There was also some overlap reported between hard and Soft Skills, especially regarding Artificial Intelligence (AI).

Health sector participants saw these hard and Soft Skills as equal and complementary, to such an extent that the new curriculum for initial medical training – *Transforming Health Education Programme* – now begins with a new module entitled *Personal & Professional Identity* (PPID). This module highlights the development of self-awareness as a priority for student doctors and is iterated through the full cycle of medical training building year on year around three main areas: Leadership, Professionalism, and Resilience. This timely and new development to the approach to medical training mirrors research conducted in the US: *‘Acting, thinking and feeling like a doctor - coming from research from Carnegie foundation’* [EI-01].

Providers and graduates both identified the complementarity of Soft Skills to hard skills and that it was not and should not be regarded as one versus the other. FET Providers also recognised the interconnectedness of Soft Skills to each other. A Community Education perspective highlighted a chasm between capacity and awareness, or a disconnect within the learners between what they can do and a corresponding soft skill. Some learners fail to identify or recognise what they do, in navigating and negotiating life, as Soft Skills:

‘For example, a woman who might have raised a family, who’s managed all sorts of challenges, who can work a budget, who can get dinner out of nothing, actually managed to look and see are her kids doing their homework, walk into a community education centre and upon talking about what she could do in education will respond by saying, ‘Sure, I can’t do anything’[PI-10].

Among education providers, there was general consensus that Soft Skills were at the very least as important as hard skills but in some instances, providers identified them as more important, especially with regard to recruitment decisions that were seen as being strongly focused on Soft Skills. This researcher offered a statement that exists in the HR setting which found resonance with employers and providers: *‘Hire for fit, train for skills...’*, inferring that, good levels of Soft Skills can indicate how easily an individual would blend with the culture of an organisation: *‘I genuinely—and I can say this hand on heart—I was hired for my role because of my Soft Skills, nothing to do with my technical ability’*[PI-08].

Policymakers saw the Covid-19 pandemic as pivotal in increasing the focus and appreciation of the value of Soft Skills. The impact of the remote work environment demonstrated the importance of good levels of communication, brought visibility to the whole area of wellbeing, and reaffirmed the importance of Soft Skills. FET tutors further confirmed that good levels of Soft Skills were

equally important for both employer:

'You are seeing, especially in the last year, the importance of people knowing how to communicate because we're all remote. The wellbeing side, the self-efficacy. So, actually I think there's a balance of both. One thing maybe this whole pandemic has taught us is that those skills they're a lot more visible, you know, if they're not there maybe.' [PO-16]

and employee: *Actually, seeing the value in it and realising that this is going to help me to succeed in my career and these are really important skills for me personally and professionally'* [EI-01].

Soft Skills were deemed essential for those working with young people experiencing fewer opportunities. Teachers/tutors/trainers need to be able to 'read the room' and assess the level of comfort, development and engagement of young people in order to create a successful learning experience for them. Such young people would have a low tolerance level of learning experiences that were uncomfortable or did not engage them:

'I think Soft Skills are paramount to be able to read a room, read where a young person is at and working from there as well, you know. and I think people know if it's working because young people vote with their feet'[PI-11].

5.1.3 Conclusion

Evidently, there is no one agreed definition or understanding of Soft Skills, but research has shown an increase in the recognition of their value in the workplace. Emotional Intelligence competencies were also identified as Soft Skills, one being a subset of the other. The juxtaposition of soft and hard skills is considered a devaluation of Soft Skills by some and a complementarity of both by others.

5.2 Priority Soft Skills for the Future of Work

5.2.1 Introduction

The future workplace raised questions and concerns around the impact of technology on human behaviour. As technology develops along the continua of Augmented Reality, Artificial Intelligence and the general pervasiveness of technology as it embeds into everyday life through the use of digital devices, there is cause for concern as to the point where humans end up serving technology rather than the other way round:

'As we progress technologically and otherwise how much of society's behaviour and the like will be determined by the tech companies? How much of how we behave going forward will be a function of technology as in humans serving the technology rather than the reverse' [Interviewer comment EI-03 concurs].

More examples of technology pervasiveness were demonstrated by the fact that the coaching

process and practice is driven, to some extent, by technology by providing reminders and ‘nudges’ to the coach and the coachee: *‘... Ironically more and more our coaching solutions are driven by technology. So, you can get little nudges ...’* [EI-03].

5.2.2 Skills Gaps and Employer Needs

Employers identified the key Soft Skills needed for Industry 5.0 as ‘tolerance of ambiguity’ and a *growth mindset*. [EI-03]. Other skills identified by employers as critical to the future of work were: *‘Adaptability, problem-solving, innovation, resilience, kind of those what they call enduring capabilities’* [EI-02]

Technology companies are caught *“between a rock and a hard place”* [EI-03] as venture capitalists are looking for evidence of company activity around sustainability and other elements pertaining to business ethics, while regulators are asking about how they are supporting their people. The economic meltdown in 2008 uncovered how poorly employees were being looked after by ‘fintech’ companies in particular and this has resulted in increased scrutiny in the period since.: *‘Fintech companies under the eagle eyes on how they treat their people’* [EI-03].

Another issue highlighted by an employer interviewee related to the generational perspective within the workplace and how a shift has taken place with Gen Y employees (mid-thirties), especially men who are rejecting the big job, long hours work culture in favour of more balance and time at home with family: *‘And I see those mostly men actually saying, ‘I don’t want to do that because I can see the lives these people have. I want to spend time with my family’* [EI-03].

The majority of people are now ‘Technology functional’ according to an employer participant, indicating that technology capability won’t differentiate people from each other any longer. This was identified as the place where ‘Soft Skills’ has a part to play as a differentiator. They further added that the refinement of Soft Skills requires experiential learning and an opportunity to practise those skills:

‘I could read a book on lots of things, but you have to actually be in a live environment where you have opportunities to practise those and refine them and understand the consequences of deploying your approaches in certain ways to see the consequences of that’ [EI-03].

Skills mismatch refers to the differences in perception between employers, providers, and graduates on what constitutes adequate workplace skills. This refers both to technical skills and Soft Skills. Employers are highlighting that graduates, though well-educated high-achievers, are not work-ready. One employer identified development areas for team members citing the fact that new entrants to the workforce - Gen Z – were significantly lower on three main

competencies: independent thinking, communications, and stress tolerance.

Independent thinking was identified by employers as a skills gap area. There was also reference to the concept of the multigenerational workplace and to the newest entrants into the workplace, Generation Z, needing considerable support: *'So, you know, you hear anecdotally, you know, people not using their initiative. So that sense of needing to be minded and handheld. And probably comes back to that independent-thinking gap'* [EI-01]. Other skills gaps identified by employers included a lack of self-awareness and inadequate language skills. One employer identified what they described as *'a level of sloppiness when it comes to language'* [EI-05] and identified this as more prevalent coming from the graduates of Institutes of Technology.

There was a general acknowledgement of the existence of a skills gap between the high level of qualifications that graduates achieved and the absence of 'work ready' skills that they displayed. These employers saw better levels of university/industry collaboration as one route to a solution. One participant from the Civil Service rated it more as an expectations gap rather than a skills gap. Graduates coming into the Civil Service with high expectations around their opportunities for development. One employer referred to the incoming graduates as lacking in initiative and being needy: *'There'll always be somewhat of a gap, I mean, unless you—unless—you know, that's almost why you have the kind of university function within some corporations, to bridge that gap a little bit'* [EI-03]. Indeed, there was a lack of understanding between employers and the education providers around skills needs and the development of a curriculum to address these needs: *'...there was actually a lot of difference between the understanding those employers had of the education and training route and the requirements of those involved in the formalisation of it, which is the ETBs and QQI'* [EI-05].

5.2.3 Industry FET Liaison

It was seen as the responsibility of the Education and Training Boards (ETB's) to manage consultation with employers as they are the delivery mechanism for new FET policy and that the level of consultation required was significant: *'... engagement with employers would happen with the ETB's'* [PO-16]. Other individual FET providers acknowledged that they had long-standing and very positive relationships with their employer organisations: *'We have lovely local employers that, you know, come to us specifically looking for clients as well, which is great. We have really, really nice relationships with employers'* [PI-08].

FET tutors indicated that employer/provider consultation was varied and ad-hoc and dependent on elements such as; how long the programme was established as in Early Childhood Education and placement was embedded into the training and; the strength and tenure of the relationship

between the representatives of the employer and provider organisations: *'Generally, it is more an ad hoc situation but would be apparent at course meetings between tutors, with some tutors keen to stress its importance and others oblivious to the need for these skills or unwilling to implement or recognise their relevance'* [FETQ]. It was pointed out that 38% of FET tutors indicated that there was either very little, or no interaction between providers and employers around the topic of Soft Skills.

One example provided by an employer interview of excellent employer/provider liaison was a partnership between a local institute and a large regional SME employer. The company assigned two members of staff to work on the development of the apprenticeship and these individuals also delivered some of the training within the institute. The company funded new equipment for the institute to facilitate the type of training that was needed. The company provided employment for the programme graduates. The partnership was identified as a key element to the success of its apprenticeship programme and further expanded its partnership by developing Memoranda of Understanding agreements with two universities to provide placement opportunities for engineering students and collaborate around initial training and skills development: *'...unlike any other model that I've seen anywhere in the FET system, basically assigned two members of staff to work on it'* [EI-05].

Employers and providers who valued the apprenticeship system had a clear sense of the value of Soft Skills. They hired for Soft Skills and fit over qualification: *'And I think it's Irish entrepreneurial—and those who would have valued the apprenticeship system and the traineeship system really, really value the Soft Skills, the ability, rather than the qualification'*[EI-05].

While providers acknowledge that employers must also seek out those with the hard skills to do the job, the considered opinion of the providers was that the learner wouldn't get the job if they couldn't demonstrate that they had the Soft Skills: *'They obviously do look for the technical skills and everything depending on the job, but it is the Soft Skills that—if the clients don't have the Soft Skills, they ain't getting that job and that's it'* [PI-08]. Providers considered that it was now time for employers to take up the mantle of Soft Skills development. They need to shift the focus onto Soft Skills and include within that: *'...creative thinking, thinking outside the box, passion and drive'* [PI-09].

FET tutor questionnaire respondents identified the priority skills for success in the future workplace.

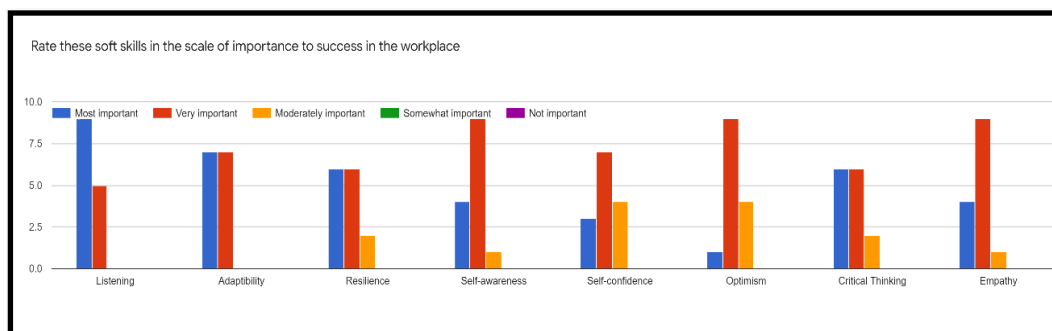


Figure 5.2: Prioritisation of Soft Skills for success in the workplace

One participant reported an example of an employer who asserted that the responsibility for Soft Skills development be situated with parents. This was countered by another provider operating within the youth service environment and working with marginalised young people, who said that the responsibility for Soft Skills development being placed on parents was a particular *'middle-class concept'* [PI-11]. She had learned from the experience of her young people that parents were often absent, part of the problem rather than the solution and, in some cases, the young people were responsible for the parent who might be suffering addiction. This infers that the context of young people is a factor in their development of Soft Skills. However, this skills gap may be somewhat moderated by the fact that Ireland now has access to a global talent pool. This brings up the whole area of inclusive thinking and management of diversity which are now considered to be the new core management/leadership competences of the modern workplace.

Healthcare employers recognised that, particularly in a service sector, people were the primary asset, and that knowledge and competence of the employee was valuable in a knowledge-based economy: *'So, at the meso-level I think, that enlightened companies are starting to get it that in knowledge-based economies all you really have is the asset, is, you know, what's in the heads of your people'* [IE-06].

One employer from a large civil service organisation identified a skills gap at middle manager level. They suggest that there is a skills gap at middle manager level around developing their own leadership capability and that of their teams, highlighting a need to move toward a coaching management practice: *'So, I see that now as a bit of a gap in relation to the middle management cohort where, you know, they're not demonstrating leadership skills and they're being managers rather than I think what they need to be moving forward is kind of coaches'* [EI-07].

One employer rejected the notion of a skills gap but rather related the issue more closely to

differing expectations. Younger cohorts – generation Z – have high expectations of being invested in toward their own development:

'I don't know if it's so much a gap. I think it's around expectations, that I'm seeing anyway. Like as a civil service we offer a certain type of work to people who come in. But for graduates, for example, they have high expectations in relation to what they're going to get out of it. So, you know, we mightn't have the level of - what's the word—mobility maybe for graduates....' [EI-07].

However, this same employer did identify a degree of skills gap in IT, noticed in particular during Covid and while onboarding new people, there was a gap in office-based IT competency for example, Microsoft & video technology, but that also this cohort – Gen Z – will learn fast and adopt new tech processes and systems quickly:

'So, we're expecting—like I've noticed this in the last twelve months, you know, when we've onboarded new staff—we're expecting them to have like a level of competency in basic, you know, Microsoft and that kind of thing and then also kind of, you know, video technology and communication and that and there's a gap there' [EI-07].

5.2.4 Priority Soft Skills

A policy maker identified what they saw as the top Soft Skills needed for the future of work. These were: 1) *Self-efficacy & Self-confidence*, 2) *Resilience & Recovery*, and 3) *Communications*. These were all identified as being of greater importance than wellbeing. All the other skills can be classified under these identified priority Soft Skills e.g., empathy, self-awareness, listening, decision-making to mention a few all fit within those three categories.

These would be the top skills identified even without the onset of the Pandemic:

'[...] You know, self-awareness, decision-making, empathy, resilience, they all fit in there. They all fit in that space. They're all there. Even if we weren't in Covid I still think I would have those as, you know, as those skills that people really need and that's why I'm so keen to change the word 'soft' [PO-16].

Graduates demonstrated a good understanding of the conditions of the future workplace. One respondent gave a comprehensive response linking the needs of the future workplace and requisite Soft Skills:

'Communication skills need to improve, I don't believe workplaces will return to 9/5 Monday - Friday in office, so in the importance of developing relationships we need to increase the effort and change how we get to know other people and find ways to connect. We need to be able to adapt quickly, with a whole new work environment and approach, different clients may expect different services from us. Taking control of your own development and motivating yourself to ask questions and take new learning/training from home. We aren't in an office, no one is watching us and it is easy to slack off and not optimally use your

time'[GRDQ].

Graduates were able to highlight the predicted benefits of a hybrid workplace. This was 2021 when the composition of the future workplace was less clear due to the ongoing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. They also made the connection, as many erroneously do, that those who were not overly 'sociable' were more likely to like the remote/hybrid model. Furthermore, graduate participants indicated that Soft Skills developed in the remote environment would need training and support to strengthen those Soft Skills when returning to the office and in a face-to-face environment. They also highlighted the distraction factor of being able to multi-task during a meeting:

'WFH makes it easier for those who may not enjoy in person human interaction/social situations as much to talk with people. A downside is that people have the ability to become distracted because they're not in the same room as the person that is talking and might feel like they can get away with doing something else during a meeting' [GRDQ]. and 'People will have developed their Soft Skills in a virtual environment and may need more support/training to home in on these skills in a face-to-face environment after WFH for so long'[GRDQ].

One graduate referenced the nature of the classification of work that would be best undertaken in the office and/or in the remote environment indicating that creative, socialised work would be better carried out in the office, but the remote environment was more suited to focused, concentrated work, having a direct knock-on impact on productivity:

'I'm hoping to be in the office for some portion of the week but more so at home, I find it's for different reasons now than before. I would rather be in person for creative work like brainstorming etc., socialising and building network but I would rather be at home more of the time for productivity. I have found it far better to get things done in a comfortable environment without losing time on commute etc., having breaks on my terms and not worrying (for example) if I have to work late that I'd have to walk home in the dark'[GRDQ].

It was identified by 25% of respondents that 'adaptability' is a key feature of the future workplace. They further indicated that this would be required as much of employers as of the employees themselves: *'I don't really think there would be any major changes, the biggest disruption was the environment people had to work in. If anything, people may come out of this situation more adaptable and resilient than before'[GRDQ].*

Skills that will differentiate people in the post-Covid workplace provided a long list of emotional intelligence competencies that included: *Communications, resilience, adaptability, self-motivation, work-ethic, relationship building, self-awareness, teamwork, optimism, listening, leadership, confidence and presentation skills [GRDQ].* When asked about the expectations of employers, the responses focused even more strongly on adaptability, critical thinking, confidence, and independence. There was a secondary focus on self-awareness, resilience, and optimism.

Values as a theme emerges most notably within the conversation on leadership, which one employer [EI-06] asserts must be grounded in those values that focus on the common good. Leadership behaviour must be bound to values, not just expressed, but also aligned to action. They contend that a values-based authentic leadership style is what is needed now. Values are more strongly evidenced in the behaviour and discourse of the more recent generations joining the workplace – Gen Y and Gen Z. The values conversation appears to be more embedded and more evident in practice within this cohort. More focus is needed to bring values to forefront in workplace conversations indicating that behaviour is underpinned by values:

‘And that the behaviour has to emerge from the values. Now, I don’t think we spend half enough time getting people to think about values. So, one of the key ideas for me in authentic leadership is in that first part of it getting, you know, self—self-awareness is spending a long time looking at values. Not just expressed values but action-lived values’ [EI-06].

5.2.5 Wellbeing Introduction

In the post Covid workplace, wellbeing is a priority consideration for employers as mental health challenges emerge resulting from the extended period of remote working. In this section, employers and providers shared their understanding of the current situation regarding workplace stress: *‘Wellbeing or whatever, some other word for it, so that people would even sort of look at it. And it’s almost like, you know, changes now whether we like it or not’ [EI-06].*

Employers pointed out that levels of anxiety and depression are higher in the younger generations - GenY and Gen Z cohorts. This is not entirely due to Covid, since it was an emerging issue before Covid. There were high levels of burnout and stress experienced within the healthcare system especially during Covid. Another area recorded was the emergence of loneliness as an issue, especially for young women: *‘Younger generations in particular, particularly young women, are experiencing a lot of loneliness in the workplace’ [EI-01].*

Covid has accelerated the recognition of the value and need to manage these challenges.

So, two areas come to mind there. I think we know levels of anxiety and depression are higher, are more common with the younger generations, regardless of Covid-19 or not that train was coming at us’ [EI-01].

Loneliness is attributed to the impact of social media and the pervasiveness of technology in the lives of young people, namely, the ‘Insta’ generation focus on online friendships and don’t appear to question the differences between online and real/actual, in-person friendships:

‘I really think it is the digital world we’re living in and, you know, they really are sort of the Insta generation with all these followers and friends, but how many genuine, real

relationships do they have in their life'[EI-01].

In the Irish Civil Service, there is still emphasis on hard skills, especially when addressing promotions according to one research participant. Currently, a two-track approach to promotion is under consideration; one track for those with high-level technical skills, which are continually needed, and another track for those with people skills which are identified here as Soft Skills. There is a view that is reflected across the civil Service that leaders must be able to manage the 'people' aspect of the job. Leaders need to be self-aware, aware of their own skills deficits or development areas and recruit into that space:

'Okay, a lot of them seem to have that charisma and empathy and all of that and they have vision and they bring people along, but also I think it's about—you know, good leadership is about using your networks and like understanding, you know, where your gaps are and kind of building a network around you where, you know, if you're not the best at people leadership that you've a good HR professional who can support you, that kind of thing'[EI-07].

There was a constant echo of the words self-awareness and balance from employers and providers in particular. Those were identified by many as the starting point, with self-awareness and emotional self-regulation as two key priority skills:

'I think again that's back to, you know, just awareness and knowing as a leader that you know, okay, you don't have all of the bits, but you'll be able to kind of leverage your network and to kind of support you to be the best leader that you can be. So again, that comes back to awareness as well [EI-07].

There has been a positive strategic shift in the value attributed to Soft Skills within the Civil Service in recent years. This is reflected by one voice, but this person occupies a unique overarching and strategic role within the Civil Service which lends credibility to this assertion. This gradual change is most evident in relation to service roles rather than technical roles. This same participant contends that there is an acknowledgement of a poor public perception of the Civil Service, which, in turn, has led to the recognition that the Civil Service needs to work more collaboratively. This has been happening to a greater degree than pre-Covid, but it is again acknowledged that more needs to be done to communicate better and bring customers closer:

'But there's definitely an acknowledgement and an understanding that that's necessary going forward, that we can't operate in silos, that we have to communicate better with each other, share what we know, and also share that with the public and bring our customers closer to us so they have a better understanding of what we do. And also bringing them into the conversation as well' [EI-07].

The current model of leadership, which is common across myriad cultures across the globe, is that which focuses on leadership being about the type of leader. According to one healthcare

employer, this will need to shift to accommodate the needs of the new workplace. They believe that what is needed now is a leadership model that starts with the internal journey of the leader and incorporates the four key elements of Authentic Leadership, which are Self-awareness, Genuineness & Compassion (relational transparency), Moral centre, and Balanced processing. An employer from the medical setting states that skill sets, with regard to the above, need to be developed, starting with self-awareness and moving through the concept of leadership as an autobiography. Hence the introduction of the PPID module into the medical curriculum which focuses, as a starting point, on self-awareness:

‘So, we take each of those and then pull out the skill sets that are associated with each of those. But the starting point is the self-knowledge. So, we then start to go into the internal journey and, you know, your leadership as your autobiography and all of that kind of stuff’ [EI-06].

There was a significant impact on the role of managers during Covid. There are multiple needs around self-awareness identified to enable them to handle issues somewhat outside their remit. It was considered important to give them tools to spot emerging psychological or mental health issues within the team.

One employer participant reported that the Civil Service was now focusing on training managers for Self-care and wellbeing. The participants stated that over the period of Covid-19 managers were more in contact with HR for support on how to identify and support their team members who were struggling with mental health related issues. The focus on Self-care for managers here is seen as a route to avoid burnout. The Civil Service is now developing a programme for people leaders to assist managers to manage effectively, discharge their duty of care and have those wellbeing conversations for a hybrid-model workplace: *‘And I actually think a lot of it is awareness. But then also giving them the tools to spot, you know, if there’s issues in the team’ [EI-02].*

5.2.6 Conclusion

It is agreed that there is a skills gap at graduate entry level as students enter the workplace, often highly qualified but are not perceived by employers to be work-ready. In some sectors another skills gap emerges at middle- manager level relating to developing their own leadership capability and that of their teams and moving toward a coaching management practice. This section has shown that the priority Soft Skills, as identified by research respondents are: Listening, Self-awareness, Optimism, and Empathy. Respondents also highlight the importance of having strong levels of Soft Skills to facilitate optimal remote working. Communication was identified as being particularly important. People are getting hired for ‘fit’ over ‘skill’ showing that employers are

more willing to teach for skills, but cultural fit is important for employee retention.

5.3 Teaching and Learning of Soft Skills

5.3.1 Introduction

The teaching of Soft Skills emerged as a theme with participants focusing on how Soft Skills are, or could be, taught. This section will address approaches to teaching Soft Skills, the media through which these skills are best taught and the needs of the FET tutor in respect of teaching Soft Skills.

One aspect of Teaching & Learning refers to the locus of Soft Skills in the experience of graduates. They pointed out that 31% indicated that Soft Skills were not addressed during second-level school. The remaining 69% indicated that during transition year, some workshops were organised by career guidance but principally, Soft Skills such as motivation and presentation were addressed during the 'mini-company' project during Transition Year. However, it was reflected that this Soft Skills focus was at best, peripheral to the main work- experience focus of the project.

In the workplace, there is a move toward a more collaborative approach to Learning & Development, a more integrated learning model through the use of multi-disciplinary teams. Employers also recognise a shift in the role of Learning & Development within organisations as they focus on future learning needs and consider how best to support learning requirements. Training delivery is blending approaches, migrating to online environments and offering more bite-sized and agile programmes. The last 12 months has seen considerable transformation to the role of Human Resource (HR) and Learning & Development (L&D) functions in servicing business needs: *'a hybrid of virtual training, in-person, and more online on-demand and bitesize and agile'*[EI-03].

Soft Skills need to be taught and learned in a context rather than stand-alone. One provider, engaged in a pilot project on integrated learning, considered that collaborative teaching and project-based learning approach was the optimum way to teach soft. This was further supported and emphasised by the FET tutor participants who favour a stronger focus on appropriate experiential methods to facilitate discovery.

While communications was identified by tutors via the questionnaire responses (FETQ) as the most prevalent soft skill, the Communications Module is seen as not putting enough emphasis on these skills. Other modules where communications skills are prioritised for example, customer service – are seen as having sufficient focus and emphasis on Soft Skills with the important caveat *'if taught properly'* [FETQ].

Those providers with experience of delivering Soft Skills training also indicated that this area was challenging to teach, especially those skills relating to intrapersonal skills to younger learners of 15-16 years of age. It was seen as challenging for this cohort to chart their own development via reflection. Teaching intrapersonal skills also requires a focus on motivation and building self-confidence. This confidence is built via a focus on good habit formation as a tool or a means for breaking unhelpful behaviour cycles and exposing learners to ways of rewiring the brain toward better behaviour patterns: *'I've started to work with clients around things like habit formation and how to break different cycles in your life and how to rewire your brain in order to break those cycles in order to then find work'* [PI-08].

Both providers and policy makers assert that context is important in the teaching and learning of Soft Skills. Their view is that Soft Skills acquisition is a by-product of engaging with other people and learning processes that occur on the job or during placement. Those FET education providers who have participated in E+ or used the placement module have a very positive reaction to the value of this type of experience on the acquisition of Soft Skills.

There was agreement across the interviewer and provider cohorts with some supporting commentary from the FET tutor questionnaires regarding the need for a systemic solution to the provision of Soft Skills education, training, and development. This section will present findings on the FET system, its enablers, constraints, the curriculum, and the focus of the new FET policy. It will also gather findings on the health system from participant interviewees.

Employers identified the need for a systems approach to the effective development of Soft Skills. The approach should crosscut the entire people system within the business end-to-end, which means from attracting talent, hiring, onboarding, developing and retaining all activity is systemised and integrated into the career path of every individual employee.

'They just go hand in glove and Soft Skills become not so much a thing that you have to do, it becomes a real enabler for every single one of those talent management stages that we want to enable' [EI-03].

A systems approach is also demonstrated through a whole-person approach to development within the workplace. This required a trained team of coaches, capable of providing coaching support at every level within the organisation: *'Trained cadre of coaches within the organisation, you know, at all levels'* [EI-03].

5.3.2 The FET System

There was a view among some FET providers and some policy participants that the FET system largely evolved, over the years since its inception, based on the good-will of those involved. They pointed out that the FET sector employs a wide range of staff under different employment and contractual conditions. Tutors/teachers developing curriculum are not remunerated for the extra time that such activities take. There is significant precarity relating to the contracts of many, but not all, FET tutors. Contracts for part-time staff are issued for contact hours only.

Any Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is conducted on the tutor's own time with no additional payment for attendance. This gives rise to a level of precarity that is challenging both for providers and employees alike. Providers agree on the challenge of building a system which is presented in the most recent FET Strategy by either trading on the goodwill of those already involved or without resourcing it properly, valuing the primary asset to achieve this end – FET professionals. *'I was like, oh, my God, like how can you build education and training, you know, to deliver something of good quality if the people are not actually resourced properly and given value themselves'* [PI-10].

Currently, the system is seen as being built on shaky ground with most of the emphasis and constraint being around input and output requirements. Findings show a general consensus from FET respondents around the levels of prescription within the system and within the curriculum, the degree of rigidity within some ETB's and the challenge tutors experience to cover all learning outputs so that learners can gain the award at whatever QQI certification level the particular module is pitched.

'Hugely, hugely - building on shaky ground, so, there's all that stuff around outputs. So, everything is measured from that end as opposed to forcing from this end. And everything has to be able to be linked back to the input, the input to the output, you know' [PI-10].

The challenge of creating space within the system to address the more complex area of Soft Skills was seen as daunting if not impossible, as there is little opportunity for the flexibility that would be needed for the teaching and development of Soft Skills:

'It's very—there's no fat in the land. You know, there's like no kind of room for manoeuvre. So, when you talk about Soft Skills, they haven't a bloody hope in a system like that where, you know, Soft Skills are so much harder to kind of prescribe for' [PI-10].

One participant cites community education as a setting which has fought to create that space to enable learners differently, because these learners are seen as having different needs. Even though community education is part of the FET system, the dominant methodology is non-

formal, challenge-based learning. Community Education deals with a different population, some of whom are seeking a transformative opportunity that community education can provide that may not link to upskilling or employment:

'And I think community education has fought for that space for their learners because learners are broken. You know, they're coming into the system, and they are broken. They're people that are reaching out for a lifeline. it's education that's going to give them that lifeline'[PI-10].

While some of these learners may never access employment, as it may or may not be the objective, they will have grown through education transformation: *'Like [these learners] they may never progress to anything, to employment, but like you're talking about somebody that their whole life has changed just because they're engaged in something educational'[PI-10].*

It is a positive of the Adult & Community education settings that a transformative educational experience can occur and not be contingent on employability. There is a degree of resistance within the adult education sector on what is described as: *'The abstraction of education for employability' [PI-10].* This resistance represents an opposition to performativity that is emerging in FET, its impact on education and training systems and most especially adult education which now sits under the remit of FET.

The concept of Lifelong Learning is seen as having shaped the current system – the educating of people to function and validate themselves within the economy. The targeted focus of Government funding means that Community Education is accustomed to having to access varied and disparate strands of funding in order to deliver the service. The criteria attached to the funding determines what can be done and it is usually within an annual timeframe. This is seen as unsatisfactory. Aontas, the National Authority for Adult Education, has produced a report showing the range of funding streams which have to be accessed. This funding framework has an impact on the type of work undertaken by organisations in order to justify being awarded the funding:

'Yeah, so Aontas have done a really good study on the amounts of funding strands going into the community education organisations and there's like twenty or thirty different strands of funding they might be drawing down at any time to just keep going, you know'[PI- 10].

A former policymaker within the FET system struggled to identify where Soft Skills were positioned within the FET system. Within certain modules Soft Skills are taught – if there was time and only when other learning outputs had been completed - as a stand-alone subject area, none could be identified. The assertion was that everyone should have these skills.

'I was a policymaker myself; I would propose that everybody, and I mean everybody. in the

workplace, in the workforce, must do some kind of like personal development programme to enhance those skills within their own job and utilise them within their own work'[PI-08].

It was notable that 84% of participant FET tutors report high levels of confidence in teaching Soft Skills, although 71% indicated that they did not receive any training or Continuous Professional Development (CPD).

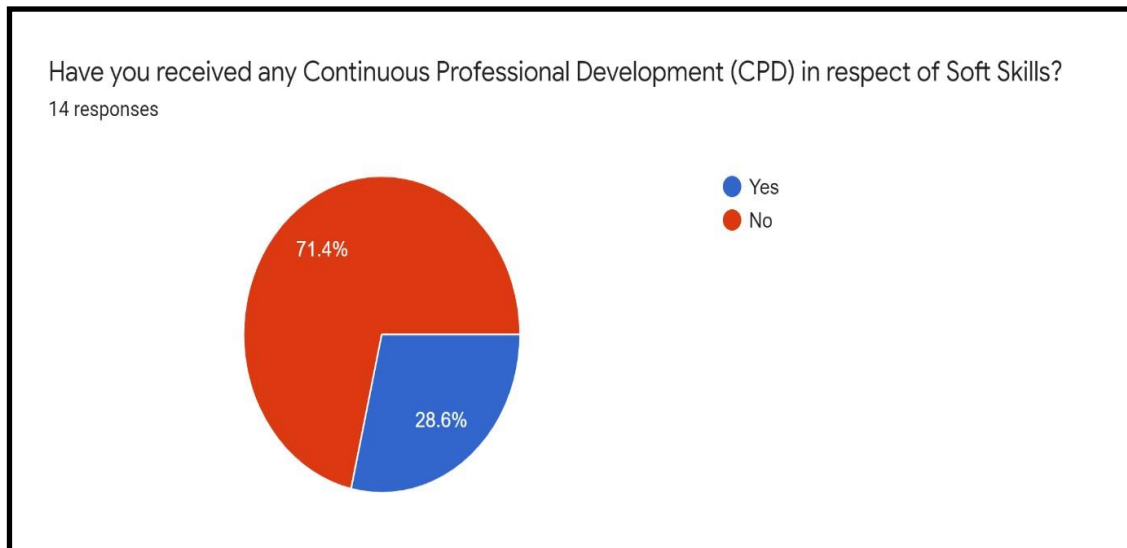


Figure 5.3: FET Continuous Professional Development (CPD) in Soft Skills

Of the 29% who did receive CPD, they indicated that it was variable in duration and focus, with some just addressing it as a peripheral issue within academic programmes; with a significant imbalance in CPD provision favouring ICT Skills over Soft Skills. SOLAS has published an FET Strategy which will drive the work of the ETBs for the next five years. The role of the ETBs is seen as the conduit between policy and practice '*...the conduit between, say, the government departments, the policymakers and funders, and ETBS as the delivery and operational agents of the policy'*[PO-17].

Much of the focus of the work of ETBs currently is on the digital transformation agenda and its impact on learning. It was stated that the Professional Development strategy is 100% focused on Technology at the moment [FETQ].

5.3.3 Intercultural Placement

The experience of living in and negotiating another cultural environment is reported to enhance these skills in participants. There was much consensus among providers who have experience of international placement as to the positive value and transformational experience that accrues to the learner under Erasmus+.

'Phenomenally,, no learner comes back having had reduced skills having gone on an Erasmus project. You know, [...] they would all have enhanced skills, because from negotiating, you know, in a foreign language, from finding their way, from, you know, working with other people, from leadership skills, working with other people when they're there, from, you know, interpersonal skills' [PI-12].

These opportunities are usually thought to be exclusively the domain of the Erasmus+ year in tertiary education. However, the experiential learning opportunities available under Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps are also available to FET learners, young people within a youth service and more recently, students in school education. 'Transformed' was the word most used, with regard to this experience: *'We know when they come back, they're going to be different kids'* [PI-10]. The principal competence that is the primary benefit of Erasmus+ and/or European Solidarity Corps activity is based on the concept of intercultural competence.

Intercultural competence in the context of the European Programmes has a narrow interpretation which is broadly positive, embracing difference and focused on European mobility and exchange:

'Working with three really hard-to-reach young people, really disengaged, and they came on a youth exchange and then getting up by themselves at nine o'clock in the morning for the programme. That was a huge thing. You know, even in terms of that was a huge transformation, that self-corrected—I mean, deciding to do something themselves proactively, which is a huge thing. But if you wrote that down...'[PI-11]

Given that such positive benefits accrue to those experiencing fewer opportunities, for some participants, it begs the question why has there not been more aggressive investment in intercultural education and opportunity for FET as there has been for Erasmus in higher education: *'Why hasn't there been investment is a question I've asked myself. Why isn't there the same investment in a FET learner having an international experience as there has been in Erasmus higher Ed?'*[PI-10].

45% of graduate respondents completed either an Erasmus year, or a year abroad, during college. When asked to describe the learning accruing to them during this period of study abroad, respondents highlighted the transformational nature of the intercultural experience.

Respondents concurred as to the positive value of an E+ intercultural experience - be it an Erasmus year or participation in an E+ mobility project or placement during an FET programme [GRDQ].

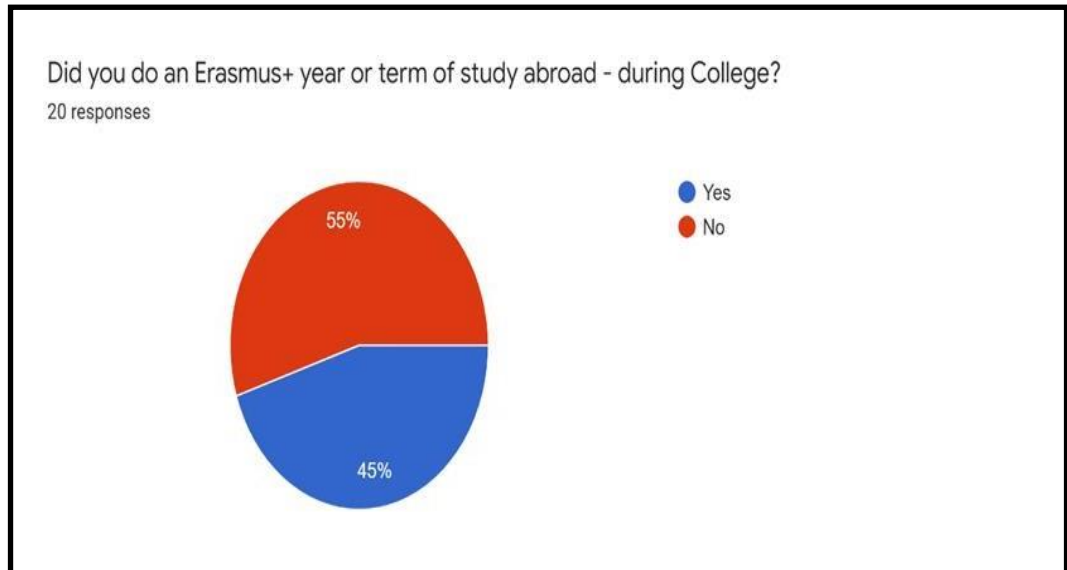


Figure 5.4: Percentage of Graduate Respondents who completed Erasmus+ intercultural mobility.

Graduates reported a range of skills and benefits acquired from the international experience: Resilience; self-reliance, independence, social development with international peers, dealing with challenge, communication, self-confidence and adaptability were among the Soft Skills highlighted. They reported that they: *'Became hugely independent; learned a lot about who I am, what I value and who I want to be; Broadened my mind and allowed me to gain perspective regarding the 'bubble' I grew up in'* [GRDQ].

They referenced developing an adaptable mindset, the ability to sustain relationships and use their empathy identifying other benefits as:

'Experience of new cultures, adaptable mindset, more appreciative of the people I met and naturally developing a want to learn more and experience more'

and

'I had the opportunity to learn a new language, deal with new situations with empathy and build new relationships and learn how to make them long-lasting' [GRDQ]

The feedback supports the value of intercultural mobility as an educational opportunity. The transformational benefit accruing to participants from the intercultural experience.

Soft Skills can be taught but only if the teacher has a good level of Soft Skills themselves and understands them. One view was that: *'If you have it, you can express it, so therefore you can*

demonstrate it and it can be observed. it can be observed, it can be taught. If you don't have it, you cannot teach it' [PO-17]. It was deemed important to engage in some self-reflection before embarking on the teaching of Soft Skills. One provider asserted that there was a specific sequence to the acquisition of competencies in general, identifying competencies as being a composite of knowledge, reflection and skill: '..... competencies are developed through reflection and knowledge and skills. So, you'd have to have the knowledge, then the reflection, and then comes the skill' [PI-09].

The teaching of meditation was identified by a healthcare practitioner as a method which has been shown to be successful in the acquisition of Soft Skills. Research has shown that it can change the structure of the brain after only eight weeks of training: *'It's not just functional changes. We're getting structural changes. You're getting changes in the thickness of the grey matter, the size of the amygdala and so on, and that's only with six, eight weeks of meditation' [EI-06].*

Apprenticeship was seen from a policy perspective as offering a huge opportunity as an avenue for teaching Soft Skills. Project-based learning, challenge-based learning, integrated teaching was piloted by one interviewee with positive results, and they posit that this is the way forward.

'Soft Skills are.... quite well structured into apprenticeship and it's identified as something that's necessary. So actually, apprenticeship is a good model for looking at it, I think' [PO-16].

In the workplace, coaching and mentoring are seen as the primary method to *'plug in'*[EI-03] those Soft Skills. Learning and Development professionals through a survey by the Irish Institute of Training and Development (IITD) identified that coaching and mentoring were the skills *they* themselves most needed [EI-04]. Findings denote that providers and tutors identified the teaching and assessment of Soft Skills as an area of challenge. The challenges of recognition and assessment were repeated through the feedback across all participant data sets.

5.3.4 Health Education

The changes taking place in health education are included here from the perspective of two participants [EI-01 and EI-06] who work at the intersection of new health curricula (private education) and corporate training and mentoring. The health education system is presented in this research because of the innovative programmes being developed with academic underpinnings of psychology and neuroscience. Initial medical education is being transformed and innovations are being introduced that would not have been considered even five years ago [EI-06], with priority being given to the acquisition of Soft Skills for future doctors. In the context of

Health, these skills are referred to as Human Factors. The way to reduce non-communicable disease within populations is to empower people to maintain their own health.

'And I think the biggest insight that Seligman et al [...] had was that, you know, wellbeing it's not the obverse of mental illness, you know. If you treat mental illness, it just gets you to kind of zero point. Wellbeing is a whole other kind of trajectory. And the things that work in treating mental illness are not the same things that will actually increase wellbeing'[EI-06]

This participant suggests [EI-06] that there is a need to teach about the diversity of challenging issues as much as there is a need to teach about the coping strategies for the challenges themselves. For example, although medics can be taught coping strategies for stress and burnout, the real drivers for such issues is under resourcing and poor management in hospitals.

'We can talk to them about resilience, and we can talk to them about, you know, developing their coping skills and all of that, but the fundamental cause of burnout is really bad management in hospitals, under-resourcing and so on' [EI-06].

5.3.5 Recognition & Assessment

In the FET context, teaching and assessing Soft Skills was also deemed to be challenging, in part, for similar reasons to the concerns at tertiary levels with the medical students – the subjectivity of the assessment process. In addition, the young age of those in PLCs, Youthreach and Education Institutes, meant that learners had little idea of how to chart their own learning through reflection; and charting the intrapersonal development process proved an even bigger challenge:

'And I did teach personal development at QQI Level 4 in Youthreach for a year-and- a-half and the intrapersonal piece was incredibly challenging I found to—not even to deliver, but just to assess with the kids, you know. They hadn't got a clue, because they were only 15, 16, you know' [EI-05].

Providers and FET Policy participants agree that learning outcomes are how the desired achievement for the learner is identified. Learning outcomes are about what changes for the learner, with regard to the chosen module of study, but participants contend that Soft Skills and the social and emotional impact of learning is currently not properly measured or evaluated [PO-16].

One policy participant outlined that there are three key steps in building out the new FET strategy: Building Skills, Creating Pathways, and Inclusion. With regard to inclusion, many of the component elements of Soft Skills become key. When looking at outcomes for the learner, SOLAS and the ETB's have a strategic performance agreement which also has three component parts: Progression to employment, Progressions to Higher Education, and Transversal Skills Acquisition. Research carried out on outcomes and progression and found that *'a lot of the time the learner*

who completes one course stays on' [PO-17].

One interviewee, involved in developing a Soft Skills module as part of a QQI Level 6 qualification in Music Production highlighted that a barrier to the introduction of Soft Skills lay in the challenge of assessment. This was echoed by several other interviewees as well as FET tutors who responded to the questionnaire: *'Assessment drives the teaching'* [PI-13].

This was further confirmed by another experienced provider on how the QQI level 6 module on Communications is less about communication and more about English language, indicating that there were approximately ten pieces of work to be produced against the assessment criteria leaving little time for anything else:

'I think the thing with the communications module in FET is it's not a communications module, it's an English language module. there's about ten pieces of assessment in it. [...] And the teacher who's teaching it does not have time to reflect or do that. they're just pumping out piece of work after piece of work.' [EI-05]

It was reported that 65% of FET tutor participants indicated that the focus on Soft Skills in QQI modules was inadequate. There are differences within the system with regard to the emphasis, or lack thereof, on Soft Skills. While pointing out the absence of value placed on Soft Skills within the structured education system, tutors reference the importance of these skills, not just for work, but for coping with life's challenges. Tutors also cite an example of the points system in second level being the:

'antithesis to the basic tenets and practices of group, team and societal action. When students don't achieve their points goal from Leaving certificate they are 'left devastated often with little of the Soft Skills vital to surviving such challenges' [FETQ].

With regard to the Personal and Professional Identity module (PPID) of the new medical curriculum, a competency-based approach was adopted which aims to incorporate a more holistic approach to training, focusing on Soft Skills development: *'PPID, as I've described it, is one of the three pillars. So, we're looking at the head, the heart, and the hands. So PPID is very much the heart piece'*[EI-01].

The *head* applies to knowledge, the *heart* to Soft Skills and the *hands* relates to practical skills. The ongoing debate within the medical curriculum redesign relates to the challenge of assessment and grading of Soft Skills. Determining a grading system for what is seen as subjectively assessed levels of Soft Skills presents challenges around rigour and reliability: *'We're very much thinking along the lines of, you know, sort of not pass/fail but has achieved or has not yet achieved without getting into grading'* [EI-01].

5.3.6 Distance Travelled

One policy participant who has a focus on delivery systems, concurred with other commentary on the challenge of assessing Soft Skills. The FET strategy 'Future FET: Transforming Learning' (SOLAS,) states that "Assessment tools can play their part in this, and this data can be complemented by the creation of a 'distance travelled' tool which captures and measures 'soft' or 'transversal' skills development of learners" (p.57).

'.....which is called the distance travelled tool, which is to see basically how far somebody has progressed with a focus on Soft Skills only in their programme of learning' [PO-17].

Research carried out by one policy organisation aimed to identify those Soft Skills developed and achieved across the learning journey. They found that there were broader benefits to the acquisition of Soft Skills than just to the programme of learning, there were positive impacts across every aspect of life:

'We did a paper a number of years back up about the wider benefits of learning, which was looking at the identification of Soft Skills as developed or achieved throughout a journey of learning' [PO-17].

5.3.7 Reflective Practice

Both employers and providers agree that Reflective Practice is key to the acquisition of Soft Skills. Reflective practice and case studies were identified as central to any form of assessment for Soft Skills: *'It is about, you know, how you're learning, how's that aiding your performance, reflectively what was your experience in the last quarter, predictively going forward what are some of the skills that you feel you might need to do even better'*[EI-03]. Reflection facilitates mindset change and is enhanced and supported through coaching processes: *'Even just developing the mindset so you have the self-capability to be more reflective as you go yourself'* [EI-03].

Employers identify reflection as the key component of Soft Skills development moving through the full cycle of observation, reflection, refinement, and feedback. They also identify that some people have a natural affinity for Soft Skills: *'Brilliant intuition, brilliant judgement, great empathy, fantastic communicators, all of that kind of stuff. So, I think there are people who are just good at it, by the way'* [EI-04].

Journalling, as part of reflective practice, is the usual way in which reflection activity is scored within the FET modules. However, it was unclear how much of the learning is actually captured through this process:

'I mean, all courses I do, and you see your reflective journal and you go, 'Oh, Lord, not

another one!’ ‘I don’t know how much of that learning to learn and the reflection, etc., is actually captured properly or fairly or—I mean, not without a load a waffle in such courses’[EI-05].

Reflective practices were strongly associated with Soft Skills acquisition within the provider voice. However, reflective practice needed to be structured and sufficient time given for learners to be able to identify the benefits of reflection: *I think you need to give that time to do that reflective practice again to reflect on, okay, what kind of skills did they learn here? And that’s all the Soft Skills’[PI-09].*

The responsibility is on the educator to bring the learners to the point where they could ask and answer what was seen as the key question – How did I grow from this?

‘I suppose it’s really the onus of the youth worker how to support young people through that process any way they want to do that or any way that they feel the young people are allowed to do that. But it is so important’ [PI-09].

Digital tools were identified by providers to assist with reflective practice for learners. Jamboard and PIC Collage were examples that were seen as useful because they acted as a reminder of learning and could be accessed easily and repeatedly by the learner on the learner’s own digital devices. A healthcare participant identified that reflection provides a new way to think about developing the individual within the workplace and is needed for this new world of work:

‘I think like getting people to look at their strengths and develop their strengths and use their strengths, the whole gratitude journey, the kindness—I think that’s going to be a big part, a new sort of emerging way of thinking about developing the individual, you know’[EI-06].

5.4 Conclusion

The findings across all three themes demonstrated that there is no one set definition or common understanding of Soft Skills. Empathy emerged as the primary soft skill along with resilience and adaptability. Communications was also identified as important, and participants highlighted the need for strong levels of Soft Skills to facilitate optimal remote working. There is a gap between expectations of employers and work-ready skills levels of graduates. It is agreed that Soft Skills will become more important as digitalisation and technological advances continue. As everyone will be *‘technology functional’[EI-03]*, Soft Skills will become the differentiator. Hybrid and remote working has uncovered issues of anxiety, disconnection, and loneliness and managers will need upskilling to enable them to provide the necessary support to staff. The teaching of Soft Skills needs to be done in an applied context. In fact, this is what appears to be most effective for Soft Skills development. For example, there is a challenge expressed by tutors and provider organisation around teaching Soft Skills online which needs to be further addressed as the future

of work migrates to a blended model. In addition, tutors and teachers need upskilling in order to teach Soft Skills and a more integrated approach is required in terms of curriculum design.

The next chapter will discuss the current findings against the literature reviewed.

Chapter 6: Discussion

This chapter discusses the thematic findings of this research under three key thematic areas which emerged, and which followed the focus of the research questions:

- Nomenclature
- Future Workplace
- Teaching & Learning of Soft Skills

6.1 Theme 1: Nomenclature

Nomenclature has presented a challenge across the literature and in the undertaking of this research. The title of the next section 6.1.1 describes the challenge of nomenclature accurately.

This section discusses the findings in relation to creating a common understanding of Soft Skills and looks to the definitions in the literature to identify any consistency. It identifies the range of labels and titles given to this topic. The discussion will consider areas of consensus and agreement and what this means in furthering the understanding of Soft Skills.

6.1.1 *The Tyranny of Language*

This title ‘The Tyranny of Language’, taken from the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principal (NAPD) paper on the FET College of the Future (2021), is an apt phrase in any discussion on Soft Skills. In the paper, the authors state that it is easier to describe FET by what is in *not* rather than what it is. As such, it is *not* second-level education, nor is it tertiary education. Much the same can be applied to the discussion on Soft Skills, in that they are not technical skills, nor are they hard skills. This research found that there were myriad names and labels applied to Soft Skills depending on the context. It is clear from the findings that different sectors refer to these skills by different names. ‘*Transversal skills*’ has been consistently used in FET since the advent of the European programmes funding intercultural placement activity as far back as the Leonard da Vinci Programme (European Commission, 1997). *Soft Skills* is not a term that is used in the youth and non-formal education setting at all [PI-11]. Soft Skills are more usually referenced under Personal Development or Professional skills within the context of community education. OECD (2017) highlighted that, despite the inter and intrapersonal classification applied to Soft Skills, they are, at times, synonymous with social and emotional skills or personal skills or people skills (Ibrahim et al., 2017).

More recent attempts to find a more appropriate name for these skills does little more than add

to the confusion. The medical education setting now identifies *Soft Skills* as *Human Factors*. The World Economic Forum identifies them as '*Uniquely Human Capabilities*' (WEF, 2020). The European Centre for Vocational Education & Training (CEDEFOP) calls them People-centred Skills Intelligence, (2021). It is interesting to note the frequency with which we are now identified by our species - the prevalence of the word 'human' as it appears several times in the nomenclature around Soft Skills – *human skills*, *human capabilities*, and *human intelligence*. This has arisen in the Soft Skills narrative because of the interface between the person and technology. Bones et al. (2019) address the opacity of technological language and how it could be better conceptualised for greater social good. The authors consider how discourse in this area serves to inform or 'disinform' non-expert understanding in this area.

In the research findings, there was considerably less commentary on the word 'skills', where participants had a direct and sometimes visceral reaction to the word 'soft' but less concern about the word 'skill'. And yet, the term *skills*, defined as something demonstrable, does not fit with the discourse in the literature which hovers more around competency or capability and is more multi-dimensional than 'skills': *I don't like the term 'Soft Skills' either. I was going to say life skills, but it's not life skills either because ...it is, and it isn't...*'[PI-08]

The term 'meta-skills' is also to be found in the new FET strategy (SOLAS, 2020, p.28), referring to Soft Skills or, more accurately, Transversal Skills. The strategy references the rapid changing of vocational and technical skills indicating that people are unlikely to prosper unless they are equipped with these 'meta-skills' which include *complex problem-solving; emotional intelligence; creativity; service orientation and cognitive flexibility* (adaptability). It begs the question then of whether these meta-skills are Soft Skills by any other to name? Maunsell (2023) provides some clarity by stating that meta-skills are those that enable people to adapt to a constantly changing world. They promote a growth mindset and are an approach that fosters life-long learning (Razzetti, 2018). Prattichok and Klaykaew (2022) divide meta-skills into three areas: *Self-awareness; Creative problem-solving* and *Resilience*, and are, as such, are subsets of Soft Skills and confirmed by the outcomes of this study. It is unsurprising that the nomenclature relating to Soft Skills is confusing. It is interesting to note the response of research participants to the perceived devaluation of these skills because of nomenclature:

'I think the language is interesting because even when I hear the term 'Soft Skills' I sort of bristle. My work is in this space, and I think [the term] Soft Skills almost diminish the value of what they are'[EI-01].

Research interviewees agreed that Soft Skills are very important now, not only to the future of work, but also to the whole life of the individual. Soft Skills, like critical thinking and self-reliance,

allow people to choose their response to a situation rather than being psychologically triggered. Soft Skills capability provides a degree of self-regulation and self-control (Newman, 2009). Nomenclature, in the business setting is different to that of the education setting. In the psychological setting, these skills characterise the self-concept and identity of the individual (Hamilton, 2015). Hence, the Soft Skills starting point for the medical curriculum as 'Personal and Professional Identity' makes sense in that context.

In settings where respondents work with people with fewer opportunities, they explained that Soft Skills needed to be introduced in a careful manner, gently over time so as not to 'frighten' the learner. It was considered to be 'too deep' [PI-08] and this type of material is introduced as part of interview preparation or as tips for improving self-confidence. They emphasised the importance of introducing these skills in a non-threatening manner. This infers that trust is important between tutor and learner in this type of setting. In the case of one provider participant, she herself was a graduate of the FET system, had experienced fewer opportunities, and had a first-hand understanding of how valuable these skills are to the development of self-validation and self-acceptance [PI-08].

When asked to identify priority Soft Skills for the future of work, there was broad consensus across the whole research participant sample that the following were the most important:

- Communications
- Adaptability
- Self-awareness
- Empathy
- Listening
- Emotional Intelligence (which incorporates empathy, adaptability and self-awareness)
- Resilience

A number of participants identified emotional intelligence as a soft skill when it is, in fact, a range of emotional competencies that combine to constitute emotional intelligence (Newman, 2016).

The findings show that Soft Skills divide into two component parts a) intrapersonal and b) interpersonal. Pre-covid, the priority skills identified were *interpersonal* skills, team participation, communication (WEF, 2020). Findings from this post-Covid research shows that respondents prioritised *intrapersonal* skills and interview discussions centred around two key concepts of self-awareness and balance: '*...self-knowledge, awareness, having a moral centre, ethical behaviour*

and genuine compassion' [EI-06].

Another employer pointed out that:

'But the starting point is the self-knowledge. So, we then start to go into the internal journey and, you know, your leadership as your autobiography'[EI-03].

The variation in terms and language for Soft Skills tends to reflect the needs and values of specific sectors. It would be beneficial to have an agreed cross-sectoral understanding of the concept and relevance of the term Soft Skills. One policymaker expressed her interest in this research in the hope of getting the name of Soft Skills changed to something more immediately understandable:

'[...] You know, self-awareness, decision-making, empathy, resilience they all fit in there... [in Soft Skills] ... They all fit in that space. They're all there. Even if we weren't in Covid I still think I would have those as, you know, as those skills that people really need and that's why I'm so keen to change the word 'soft' [PO-16].

However, as Parlamis and Monnot point out, the term Soft Skills has embedded itself into the various disciplines to the point that it is difficult to imagine such a change. They point out that they see their suggestion of an alternative term CORE – Competence in Organisational and Relational Effectiveness – to be on a par with STEM and that it becomes part of the vernacular over time and shifts the conversation. As they say, *'Ultimately, words create reality and therefore, words can change reality'* (p.227).

6.1.2 Toward a definition of Soft Skills

No clear, singular definition of Soft Skills emerged from the research for the same reason that none has emerged from the literature. There are myriad definitions of Soft Skills across the literature (Robles, 2012; Heckman and Kautz, 2012; Hurrell, Scholarios and Thompson, 2013). Several attempts at a definition are offered but there is no one agreed definition. A definition or some descriptive frame is the necessary starting point for any meaningful discussion on Soft Skills (Ciamatti, 2016). One definition that is noteworthy is that of Heckman (2012) who said that *'Soft Skills predict success'*.

One policy participant commenting on the teaching of Soft Skills stated that: *'If you don't have them, you can't demonstrate them; if you can't demonstrate them, you can't teach them'* [PO-17]. This statement in itself is open to argument but, in addition, this statement does not consider the precursor step of defining what is meant by Soft Skills. It is reasonable to ask the question. *How can you determine if you have these Soft Skills if you don't know what they are?* The research supports the contention of Cinque (2016), in that there needs to be a classification of Soft Skills; that the theme is too broad and layered for a single definition. *Hard Skills*, against which *Soft Skills*

are juxtaposed, are defined by the subject matter i.e., the technical knowledge and competency relates to the subject. Consequently, the hard skills related to Technology will be different to those related to Medicine. There is no such clarity in regard to Soft Skills. Soft Skills are neither domain specific nor practice specific (Boyce et al., 2001). The immediate and only apparent classification, which is also confirmed from the research findings, divides Soft Skills into *Intrapersonal* and *interpersonal*.

Marin-Zapata et al. (2021), conducted a systematic review of the Soft Skills literature and found very little standardised, consistent treatment of the topic. They found that over 50% of the studies they reviewed didn't even provide a definition of Soft Skills. The range of different vocabulary, already referred to in Chapter 3, highlighted the different terms that are used to describe Soft Skills – Transversal Skills (VET); Uniquely Human Capabilities (WEF) CORE Skills to mean Competence in Organisational Effectiveness (Parlarmis & Monnot, 2018). Maunsell (2023) points out that Meta-skills are not Soft Skills or more accurately given the sector – not Transversal skills – but positions them as a subset of Transversal (Soft)-Skills. It is debatable if the additional terms do anything other than add confusion. This confusion leads to a lack of robust research which could be used to justify the investment in Soft Skills. Marin-Zapata et al. (2021) cite Lipman (2019) in attributing the confusion to what they call *Theoretical Dispersion* (p.1) and methodological confusion borne from a lack of consistency.

Another challenge highlighted throughout the literature is the multitude of associated terms used in the formation of a definition such as competency, skills, expertise and acumen all overlapping and lacking in clarity (Bamiatzi et al., 2015). Parlarmis and Monnot (2018) suggest putting an end to the term Soft Skills altogether, in favour of something more appropriate to describe the *critical social and organisational skills* (p.1) for the workplace. They quote the following from a lecturer to new MBA students which makes clear the importance of Soft Skills in career progression:

I tell them two things: 1) regardless of chosen major, almost all of you are going to end up in management and 2) because the most difficult issues in managing organisations and the people who inhabit them involve organisational and relational skills, the 'soft stuff' is actually the 'hard stuff' (ibid, p.1).

Parlarmis and Monnot (2018) suggest that their offering of CORE as an acronym that better describes the needs of the modern workplace. These skills contribute to success in modern organisational life and are both relational and organisational. Relational skills, they suggest, incorporate characteristics such as positive attitude; trustworthiness, effective communication, leadership ability, ability to manage emotions, team player and self-awareness. They argue that the word 'soft' is laden with meaning and negative connotation, so too it would appear that

'relational' is laden with meaning but does, however, avoid the negativity and weakness associated with the word 'Soft'. They also offer the term CORE to define Soft Skills as a competence rather than a skill. There is some congruence across the literature that *competence* meaning knowledge, skills and attitude/experience, provides a broader basis to understand the complexity of Soft Skills. Marin-Zapata et al. (2021) confirm that, across the literature of their systematic review, the terms skills and competences are not adequately differentiated and, for the most part, are used interchangeably.

The findings in Chapter 5 show various attempts at a definition and the literature is strewn with various attempts to define Soft Skills. Such is the breadth of the term that some of the research participants were changing their minds about their definition mid-sentence. The breadth of scope of the terms is part of the challenge. In defining Soft Skills, participants gave greater emphasis to the intrapersonal elements of Soft Skills, prioritising the concept of who we are over what we do - prioritising intrinsic over performative aspects of Soft Skills (see Figure 6.1 below).



Figure 6.1: Range of terms for soft-skills suggested by research participants

6.2 Theme 2: Priority Soft Skills for the Future of Work

This section focuses on the future workplace and the Soft Skills that are now prioritised to address workplace needs. A skills gap is reviewed, highlighting the different perception between employer and graduate as to whether the graduate is work-ready coming out of college. Priority skills are identified, both from the literature and from the research, and these are explored.

Skills mismatch results form an interplay of supply and demand and can cover a range of

imbalances; where individuals take up jobs for which they are over-qualified, or their skills are inadequately utilised (CEDEFOP, 2014). In this context, it is used to mean the difference in expectation that employers have of graduates coming into a company from college: *'And again, it's probably back to the Soft Skills. It's things around that impact personal awareness'* [EI-02].

The graduates fulfil the academic criteria to attain high level qualification, attain the job, but employers consider their performance to be not work-ready:

'But for graduates, for example, they have high expectations in relation to what they're going to get out of it. So, you know, we mightn't have the level of mobility maybe for graduates who are looking for maybe and sometimes we just want graduates to fit in, you know, a role and do that job and they expect to be developed and, you know, supported and all that. So, I think there's a gap there between kind of expectations and reality for graduates' [EI-07].

This view is not shared by the graduates who have high expectations of their first workplace experience and of their leaders. Skills mismatch is also addressed in the new FET Strategy, indicating that Ireland needs to address vocational options and pathways perhaps even at second level to keep pace with skills needs:

"Ireland quite rightly prides itself as being one of the most educated workforces in the EU and OECD, with HE attainment levels helping to attract inward investment and drive productivity growth. While this reputation needs to be protected and built upon, there is research by the ESRI among others, which suggests some skills mismatch in the Irish workforce, and that more vocational options and pathways could help to address this, starting at secondary school level" (SOLAS, 2020, p. 30).

There is a growing concern that available skills cannot meet the fast-changing demands of the economy. A fast-changing world of work, characterised by technological evolution, globalisation, and contingency work practice provides for a growing skills gap and brings with it an urgency for resolution. The Expert group on Future Skills Needs asserts the need to ensure that: *'young people receive the maximum benefit from our formal education system. Secondly, we need to ensure that those within the workforce have opportunities to engage in learning'* (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2007).

To address this growing concern, the Irish government, in 2018, set out a new policy framework "Supporting Working Lives and Enterprise Growth in Ireland" for employee development opportunities in Ireland as part of the annual Action Plan for Education. It included as a stated aim a vision of the workplace in Ireland where the "provision in further education and training which supports employee development is flexible, high quality, accessible and relevant to the changing needs of employees, the economy and industry". In particular, one of the key drivers of this policy was the development of Soft Skills in the workplace (2018, p.6).

One skill which was repeatedly identified as absent within the graduate cohort was resilience. The Deloitte Gen Z and Millennial Global Survey (2022), Gen Z – those born after 1996 – in particular are reported as saying that they're tired of being resilient and would like their employers to better look after their needs. This may imply a difference in the view of employers and employees as to what resilience is. Employers do expect a gap with new graduates because many will not have worked before, and some bigger organisations have learning and development structures to enhance the work readiness of new entrants: *'There'll always be somewhat of a gap, I mean, unless you—unless—you know, that's almost why you have the kind of university function within some corporations, to bridge that gap a little bit'* [EI-03].

Better levels of consultation and interaction between provider and employer is seen as the solution (McKinzie, 2020) but it appears that much would depend on the nature of the relationship between the representatives of each institution:

'Generally, it is more an ad hoc situation but would be apparent at course meetings between tutors, with some tutors being keen to stress its importance and others oblivious to the need for these skills or unwilling to implement or recognise their relevance' [FETQ]

It was reported by 38% of tutor respondents that there was little or no employer/provider interaction around the topic of Soft Skills. It is clear that the practice around consultation between employer and provider is not consistent and that much depends on the relationships between the individual organisation representatives. While providers acknowledge that employers must also seek out those with the technical skills needed to do the job, they also contend that the learner wouldn't get the job if they couldn't demonstrate that they had the Soft Skills:

'They obviously do look for the technical skills and everything depending on the job, but it is the Soft Skills that—if the clients don't have the Soft Skills, they ain't getting that job and that's it' [PI- 08].

Provider-participants consider that it was now time for employers to take up the mantle of Soft Skills development. They need to shift the focus onto Soft Skills and include within that:

'...creative thinking, thinking outside the box, passion and drive' [PI-09].

Employer-participants report a lack of initiative and independent thinking with graduates needing more support than expected. There is a difference between employer expectations and graduate perceptions of the most important Soft Skills. When asked about their expectations, employer responses focused more strongly on *adaptability, critical thinking, confidence and independence*. There was a secondary focus on *self-awareness, resilience and optimism*.

Soft Skills have emerged as of significant relevance for practitioners and academics alike;

representatives of the contemporary management sciences have considered these skills as people skills which are essential to strong organisational development and effectiveness. McKinsey (2021) contends that for organisations to be successful, they need to focus capability on having: *Deep cooperation across distributed work teams; Collaboration mindset; Inclusion to foster diverse & innovative thinking; Curiosity & growth mindset; Consciousness and Psychological safety.* 43% of employers and providers interviewed identified mindset as being a key soft skill needed for Industry 5.0. 'Tolerance of ambiguity' was another soft skill identified which has been alternately described as adaptability and cognitive flexibility by research participants.

Across the research and the more recent literature, Empathy was identified as a priority soft skill. There was some argument as to whether *skills* was an appropriate label, as it linked more strongly to values for some participants. There were several points where the distinction between the concepts of values and Soft Skills became blurred. It was also described in terms of how it is demonstrated and brings up the subject of skills versus competencies - being versus doing.

So, the first one that comes into my mind, and I'm not sure if everyone will call it a skill, but the word that comes to my mind is 'empathy'. But the skill that it's linked to is communication, interacting with others. It's links to understanding. So, there's a knowledge part of it there as well' [PI-11].

It is also worth noting that, in the context of emotional intelligence (EQ), Empathy is demonstrated through listening, also identified in the research as another soft skill and also reflected in the literature around Emotional Capital (Newman, 2016).

6.2.1 Resilience

Findings from the research indicate that 'Resilience' is regarded as a necessary soft skill. Resilience has been defined as: *'The potential to exhibit resourcefulness by using available internal and external recourses in response to different contextual and developmental challenges'* (Pooley and Cohen, 2010). However, some of the protective factors for resilience as outlined by University of Pennsylvania, are also identified by research participants as Soft Skills. It would appear, therefore, that resilience is a consequence of the activation of a number of these protective factors or Soft Skills, rather than a single skill in itself.

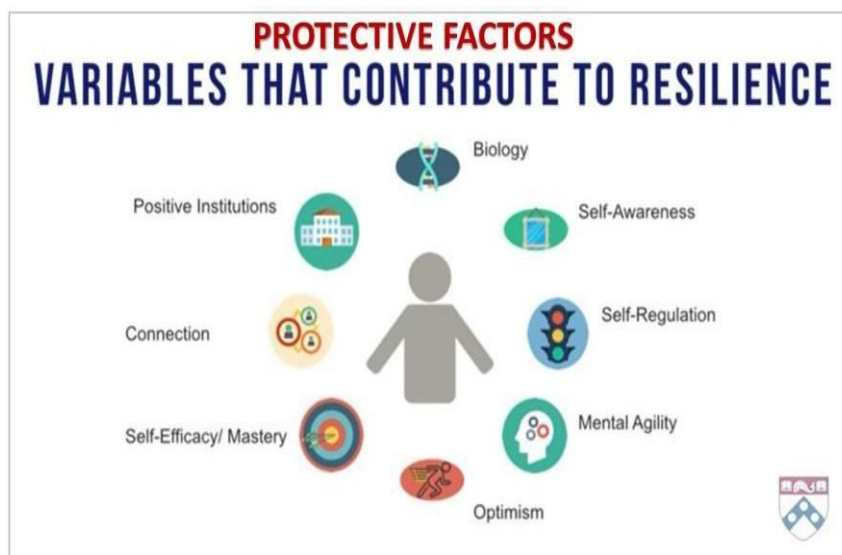


Figure 6.2: Variables that contribute to Resilience (University of Pennsylvania)

Key variables which impact resilience include *Cognition* – how one thinks about life, strengths and mental fortitude; *Emotion* which focuses on the downregulation of anxiety; and *Mindset*, which describes the ability to bounce back after challenge or adversity. Yaeger and Dweck’s (2012) work with students on Fixed and Growth mindset has relevance here. Their work shows that psychological interventions are effective in changing student’s mindsets and fostering these mindsets can promote resilience.

There is a need to teach about the diversity of challenging issues as much as there is a need to teach about the coping strategies for the challenges themselves. For example, medics can be taught coping strategies for stress and burnout but the real drivers for such issues is under resourcing and poor management in hospitals:

‘We can talk to them about resilience, and we can talk to them about, you know, developing their coping skills and all of that, but the fundamental cause of burnout is really bad management in hospitals, under-resourcing’ [EI-06].

6.2.2 Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence is identified by some interview participants synonymously with Soft Skills and at other times as a sub-set of Soft Skills. Newman (2016) identifies the ten components of the Emotional Capital Model of Emotional Intelligence as a synthesis of all the studies carried out on Emotional Intelligence over a decade. These components are presented through a leadership lens and with coaching guidelines for their development but are relevant in any sphere of personal development. They are: *Assertiveness; Empathy; Flexibility; Optimism; Relationship Skills; Self-*

Actualisation; Self-awareness; Self-confidence; Self-control; and Self-Reliance. According to Newman (2016), self-reliance is an important competency to develop. He describes self-reliance as the ability to make independent, self-directed decisions. If self-reliance is low, then a leader may postpone making critical decisions or stress about the details of a decision made after the fact. He also identifies that if self-reliance is low and empathy is high, then a leader might make different decisions to protect the relationship (Newman, 2016).

Newman calls Emotional Intelligence the creation of '*emotional wealth for competitive advantage*' (2009, p. 9). This is done by, a) appealing to the emotion of the customer so that they buy into the brand; b) creating internal emotional capital by treating all employees as intellectual and emotional investors in the company; and c) managing their own emotional reserves by which they can continue to inspire others.

6.2.3 Adaptability

Adaptability is described by Neman (2016) as the ability to be flexible, both in attitude and in practice. Adaptability usually indicates that a person is able to quickly adjust to changing circumstances. Newman also points out that people who have high levels of adaptability are often champions of change and categorises the ten competencies of emotional intelligence (EQ) under three categories, Inner focus; Outer focus and Other focus, as illustrated in Fig. 6.3. The total represents the total combined score from the Emotional Capital Inventory psychometric (ECI). This is a 360-degree feedback instrument, well researched and validated and presents the opportunity to learn how other people experience your behaviour on the ten ECI competencies

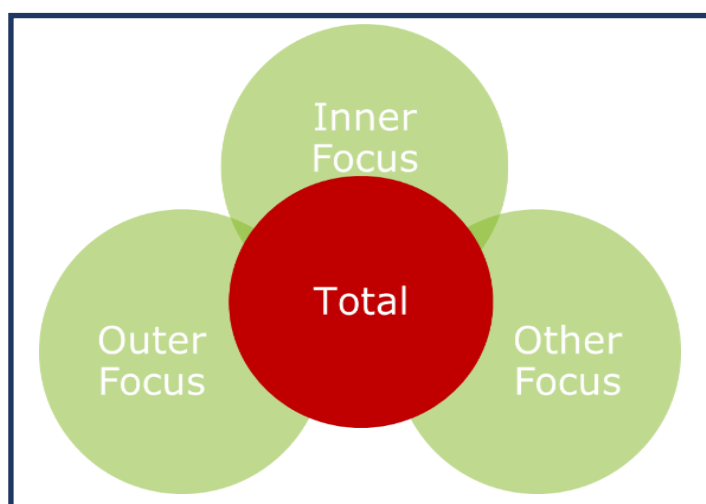


Figure 6.3: Categories of Newman Emotional Intelligence Competencies

Other skills identified by employers as critical to the future of work were: *'problem-solving, innovation, resilience, kind of those what they call enduring capabilities'* [EI-03]. One employer from a large technology organisation asserted that all employees are technology functional and so it is the Soft Skills that are now the differentiator.

Positive Psychology as a discipline has gained traction in the last few years in particular. As organisations struggle to find ways to help their employees to connect and stay connected while still working from home, managers are the focal point to enable this to happen.

Dutton & Cameron's work (2016) has enjoyed renewed focus as organisations seek to retain key talent by focusing on their wellbeing and by delivering a culture of Positive Organisation Scholarship. Kameron, (2013) in her book on Practicing Positive Leadership recalls the four key strategies that have been shown to produce extraordinarily positive performance in organisations. These strategies are a *creation of a positive climate, positive relationships; positive communication, and positive meaning*. These strategies dovetail well with Industry 5.0 (McKinsey, 2021), which builds on cyber and network technological development of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) but which elevates the concepts of organisational purpose and meaning. In the context of medical education, there is a concerted move toward embedding a culture of Positive Organisation Scholarship, using positive psychology coupled with transformative leadership:

'...That notion that we're not creating the kind of leadership—we're not doing it in medicine, we're not doing it in nursing. We're still training people for a healthcare service that exists now rather than five, ten years from now'[EI-06].

Bass & Riggio (2005) identify Transformative Leadership as having its roots in self-leadership which overlaps with self-regulation, self-awareness and self-management. One Healthcare employer contended that the sector could not prepare for an uncertain future by looking backwards. They state that in healthcare there has been no attempt to create the kind of leadership that would be extant five years from now [EI-06]. It was stated that Training design continues to focus on the system as it is rather than projecting 5-10 years forward to determine future needs [EI-06]. It was contended that *'Leadership must lead from the future as it emerges'* in order to futureproof organisations (Scharmer, 2016). Bass & Riggio (2005) contend that the role of the transformational leader is to align the organisation and its people. The transformational leader needs to inspire, intellectually stimulate, and be individually considerate of the team. Transformational leadership requires a higher moral stance, and contrary to earlier expectations, women leaders tend to be more transformational than their male counterparts. Indeed, transformational Leadership has been found to be more effective than transactional leadership in a wide variety of settings.

Employers assert that initial medical education is being transformed and *'innovations have been introduced that would not have been considered even five years ago'* [EI-06]. Participants point out that priority was given to the acquisition of Soft Skills for future doctors [EI-06 and EI- 01]. In the context of health, these skills are now referred to as Human Factors. The introduction of the very first module on the initial medical education programme – Personal & Professional Identity – prioritises the acquisition of these skills. This is an iterative process, as the link between understanding to practice to behaviour can be a protracted process. This programme has iterations for each year of study at an advancing level in line with progression through the six-year curriculum. This supports the assertion that behaviour change needs 'space-time', time within the programmes to re-visit the learning and refine the Soft Skills further. It is interesting to note that it has taken such a long time for the curriculum to be revised and that the introduction of such a module, while a positive development, is considered innovative.

6.2.4 Values

Across the research, there is reference to Soft Skills as they link with values. The characteristics of Industry 5.0 incorporates meaning and purpose which also links to the values of organisations. This is reflective of the Stoics and how they viewed living life adhering to a core set of values.

'Just what we've been talking about there, the values, it goes straight back to the Stoics. That's precisely what the Stoics were saying that you had to organise your life on the basis of a set of core values, one of which is kindness, which is really interesting'[EI-06.]

On participant employer highlighted Marcus Aurelius as an example of a leader who lived life from a moral centre, which he believes, as a philosophical base, is just as relevant today. In his view, modern organisations are not structured around philosophical thinking or practice.

'Now, we really have lost all of that thinking, you know, in modern—in the way we structure modern organisations'[EI-06].

In attempting to link Soft Skills to values, there are a number of questions to be explored. For example, are intrapersonal and interpersonal Soft Skills fundamentally a representation of a person and their values, evidenced through their behaviour in a professional context? If this is case, then it brings up the question of how do we teach these skills? If Soft Skills are a representation of a person and their values, then how closely are these values linked to their self-concept and how closely to they define their own identity?

6.2.5 Wellbeing

Wellbeing has emerged as a strong organisational agenda to address the high levels of anxiety and

stress being experienced within the workforce (McKinsey, 2021). Gen Z, in particular, are concerned about their future, the future of the planet and how they will financially survive:

‘Younger generations in particular, particularly young women, are experiencing a lot of loneliness in the workplace’[EI-01].

This is not a new phenomenon and is not solely due to the impact of Covid-19. However, Covid-19 accelerated the need to address wellbeing, to better discharge their duty of care to employees and has recognised the value of Soft Skills as a way to build resilience (McKinsey, 2021).

Managers have experienced a sharp change in the focus of their roles during Covid. There was a recorded increase in the support required from HR to handle wellbeing conversations, as many felt this was beyond their competence and needed support to help them identify how they could support someone struggling with mental health issues. Organisations are now training their managers in these sensitive areas to ensure that team members feel connected to their workplace and team (Gartner, 2022).

McHugh et al. (2021) identify a movement toward creating a culture of authenticity, belonging, and support. The move is highlighting the priority given to transparency and empathy. They identify the need for employers to invest in *‘holistic wellbeing programmes’* as a means of eliminating stigma and offer access to a *‘continuum of care’* which aims to equalize the importance of mental health to physical health. The introduction of a Chief Wellness Officer has also been shown to positively impact employee wellbeing, increase worker engagement and decrease stress levels. This has also helped with collaboration between co-workers by supporting them to connect psychologically while continuing to work remotely. (Laker and Roulet, 2021; Gartner, 2022). Findings show that wellbeing is becoming more important in societies and economies: *‘At macro level, wellbeing has become a central topic of consideration and some countries have national wellbeing budgets and metrics equivalent of GDP or GNP may well be applied to Wellbeing’* [EI-06]. The prioritisation of wellbeing into economic and national agendas reflects a changing perspective of the workplace.

6.2.6 Wellbeing as a Skill

Currently, in the workplace, much of the Soft Skills provision is located under the banner of wellbeing. Ensuring connection, reducing isolation, training managers to be cognizant of the non-verbal communication of their team members and so on. Much of the training in regard to Wellbeing is focused on managing stress and creating positive behavioural habits that contribute positively to how people are feeling. In Neuroscience, new information about the neurobiology of wellbeing and how, by marshalling our thoughts, we can improve our wellbeing. Davidson (2016)

asserts that learning of wellbeing is like the learning of any other skills and offers four, neuroscientifically validated, components of wellbeing: *Resilience, Outlook, Attention, and Generosity*.

In terms of Resilience, those with a better ability to rapidly recover from adversity have higher levels of wellbeing, with a positive outlook that allows one to savour the small joys and positives experienced. This can be activated by loving-kindness meditation. Even with only seven hours of meditation, training circuits in the brain were responding and predicted pro-social behaviour. Attention serves to highlight the value of focus. According to Davidson, a wandering mind is an unhappy mind. He cites Harvard research in saying that 47% of adult waking time is not focused on anything at all. He highlights the quality of attention is very important and promotes positive presence. Generosity highlights demonstrating the positive value of altruistic behaviour and it activates circuits in the brain toward wellbeing. These circuits exhibit plasticity and can therefore be shaped.

6.2.7 Multigenerational Workplace

It is posited that there are currently up to five generations within the workplace (Collings & McMackin, 2019). Gen Y constitutes the largest number at present and older Gen Y employees are now entering leadership positions. Employers need to become aware of the specific needs and nuances of each generation to determine organisational priorities and goals. Leadership has a distinct role in binding the generations together and providing an organisational culture based on explicitly stated and lived values. Each generation holds a different world view, goals, values, and beliefs, with trust becoming a premium (Purdue University Global, 2021 and SHRM foundation, 2017).

Coaching and mentoring are now key strategies to enable organisations to increase employee satisfaction and ensure that employees are facilitated to acquire all the skills needed to deliver on the organisation's purpose and mission (Purdue University Global, 2021). In binding the generations together, especially in remote or blended settings, employers realise that they will have to provide space for creativity and innovation, as well as invest in key Soft Skills such as: critical thinking, problem-solving; decision-making adaptability to influence the growth of a multigenerational workforce: 'Technology, communications and relationships must be leveraged in addressing the need of the employees as well as the needs of the organisation' (Sessoms-Penny, 2021).

The generational concept is well understood within the business setting but much less accommodated in the educational setting. In the context of education, it is recommended to

consider the 'age' and point in the life-cycle, rather than the generation, on the basis that there is little hard evidence to support the generations theory (Rudolph and Zacher, 2015). This view of minimal evidence to support the generations theory is supported by the experience of one research participant who sees no '*fallout along clear generational lines*' [EI-03] and indicates that life-stage, maturity and experience combine to form more relevant measures of someone's Soft Skills competency. He further indicates that learning agility and mindset are more predictive of adaptability and Soft Skills competency than age. Developing Soft Skills, he contends, reflects an engaged relationship with the manager [EI-03]. This supports what has been said in the literature review, and again in the findings, that Soft Skills are acquired in a specific context and applied setting.

6.3 Theme 3: Teaching and Learning of Soft Skills

This section discusses the findings on the teaching and learning of Soft Skills within the FET environment. It focuses on the broader focus of education, the teaching strategies highlighted by participants in teaching Soft Skills, and the benefit of intercultural placement in the acquisition of Soft Skills, as well as the issues pertaining to assessment.

6.3.1 Purpose of Education

There is a tension across this current research between the purpose of education and the purpose of training. The purpose of training is to develop skills to prepare the learner for the workplace and as such, this research is focused on identifying the priority Soft Skills and considering how they are best provided to the learner/employee. However, the deeper purpose of education is to release and realise the potential of the individual, to enable them to make choices about their life and their participation in society. Employment may not be the goal in the context of education and is certainly not the only goal. Education in a position of service to the needs of the workplace and this is evidenced in the increasing performativity of FET. The call for better employer/provider liaison creates a situation where the employer becomes the driver of education provision. That tension also exists in the language between business and education. Talent and human capital are distinctly corporate ways of referring to people e.g., *The War for Talent: Retaining Talent* - identifying people or groups by skills and capability and is at odds with the terminology used in an education setting.

There is a concern reflected in the research amongst those who are involved in Adult and Community Education that this vibrant and uniquely placed educational space is being swallowed up within the new FET policy and that the philosophical underpinnings of Adult and Community Education would be eroded [PI-10]. Lynch, Grummell and Devine's (2012) work on New

Managerialism in Education provides a stark account of the changing philosophy of education provision in Ireland.

It is a positive quality of the Adult and Community Education system that a transformative educational experience is not contingent on employability. There is a degree of resistance within the Adult Education sector on what is described by one participant as: *'The abstraction of Education for Employability'* [PI-10].

Findings show that participants are conscious of the particular restrictions for working with learners to tight timelines and programme deadlines, awards, and funding. FET (including Adult and Community Education) is funded via targeted programmes with reporting timelines of one year, meaning that organisations were adjusting their work to fit with the funding criteria and had to have work completed usually within a 12-month cycle. When it comes to personal development, behavioural shift longer timelines are needed:

'But they have to actually be delivering these kind of broader programmes—need to allow for that space for things to happen naturally. Because you know and I know that Soft Skills happen in a much more creative way. It takes time. It takes space' [PI-10].

The National FET Strategy (2020-2024) highlights the importance of the community-based ethos and highlights a critical component of that ethos if found in the 'not easy to categorise' area of community education (p. 24). With its large network of 293 centres around the country, community education provides core and foundational programmes based on the needs of the learner at levels 1-4. The constraint of tight timelines mitigates against personal development and the methods of group work and peer work required for social learning underpinned by the principles of Vygotsky. The Freirean principles of education for the whole person and being responsive to the context from which the individual is coming if a core philosophical pillar of community education.

Findings show a degree of frustration with FET governance structure regarding precarious employment. Tutors complained significantly about the precarity of the employment status of some tutor colleagues. This issue exists across the whole tertiary sector as outlined in Fitzsimons, Henry and O'Neill (2021).

'I was like.... how can you build and education and training, you know, the functioning of TEs to deliver something of good quality if the people are not actually resourced properly and given value themselves?' [PI-10].

The majority of FET professionals who participated in this study were full-time or had temporary whole-time contracts. For others, however, contact hours only were the single basis of

remuneration. Participants indicated that there was no payment for attendance at CPD events. This negatively impacts the psychological contract between FET institutions and tutors. However, the dedicated professionalism of tutors stabilises the system but is, at best, a short-term solution.

'And that they don't get like days, they don't get CPD days. So, they have to use holidays to go, or their own time, to go and—things like that. So, there's a lot around the preparatory piece' [PI-10].

As one FET provider said:

'The current FET system is built on the good will of its dedicated professionals' [PI-13]

One question which emerges from the current research relates to the responsibility for the provision of Soft Skills. Is it the responsibility of parents to provide foundational education on Soft Skills, for example, manners and social interaction? Also, is it the responsibility of the education systems and if so, at which level? It would appear that Soft Skills are indirectly addressed at primary level where children are taught to share with others, be kind, defer gratification, and protect the environment. At second level, the focus on Soft Skills is reduced because of the subject focus of the curriculum. At FET levels 1-4, Soft Skills are addressed via personal development within the communication module and other foundation skills modules [PI-08]. At levels 5-6, the communications module is the main conduit for Soft Skills.

The new FET policy puts a stronger focus on transversal skills and acknowledges CPD is necessary to enable tutors to deliver the requirements of the new policy (SOLAS, 2020). This, however, is not specifically stated for Soft Skills per se, but one policy participant acknowledged the need for CPD for tutors to counter the perceived assumption that any tutor of any subject can just automatically teach Soft Skills.

Seeing as these skills crosscut every aspect of life and not just work, it is the responsibility of all stakeholders; parents, educators and employers to be invested in the development of the rounded person (Cimatti, 2016). One employer/provider participant pointed out however, that: *'I think...by the time you try to deliver Soft Skills at that level you're talking to teenagers. It's too late'*[EI- 05]

Another provider asserted that there was a specific sequence to the acquisition of competencies in general, identifying competencies as being a composite of knowledge, reflection and skill.

'..... competencies are developed through reflection and knowledge and skills. So, you'd have to have the knowledge, then the reflection, and then comes the skill' [PI-09].

The teaching of meditation was identified by one healthcare practitioner as a method which has shown success in the acquisition of Soft Skills. They contend that meditation can *change the structure of the brain after only eight weeks of training; 'It's not just functional changes. We're getting structural changes. You're getting changes in the thickness of the grey matter, the size of the amygdala and so on, and that's only with six, eight weeks of meditation'* [EI-06]. This is now confirmed by Davidson in his work on the value of 'attention' as one of the neurobiological drivers of wellbeing.

Methodologies highlighted as effective in the teaching of Soft Skills included integrated teaching. At the time of the current research, one college was piloting a project around integrated programmes where all subject teachers would collaborate around a central project which would constitute the baseline content for the teaching of that subject [PI-18]. For example, the English teacher would teach letter writing through the medium of the learner writing to a client or a supplier related to the project. Further piloting continues. One learning from the first pilot was the importance of complete team teacher buy-in and expectations around corrections and assessment techniques to be completely clear and agreed prior to the start.

Reflective practice and micro-credentials are becoming theoretically sound instruments for measuring learning and the distance travelled. SOLAS and ETBI are currently working on a 'distance travelled' instrument to be delivered out across FET as a way of recording and tracking the learning journey. This will go some way to addressing the challenges of measuring or capturing the learning from Soft Skills development.

Intercultural mobility programmes have also been shown to have a very positive impact on staff who have engaged with and participated in the E+ programme. Activities such as Transnational Cooperation Activities (TCA) which are courses run by National Agencies for Erasmus+ (E+) and open to NA nominees to attend, provide an accelerated path to acquisition of Soft Skills and also functions as continuous professional development. Networking activities (NET) under the European Solidarity Programme (ESC) offer similar opportunities.

A Transnational Cooperation Activity (TCA) funded under Erasmus+ was discussed with a provider-participant who was involved in the *Among Others* partnership supported by Erasmus+. This was a European partnership of five National Agencies who were working to introduce non-formal education methods into the more structured tertiary learning environment, specifically focused on Intercultural competence.

McLoughlin (2020) and the Tracing Impact of European Work Placements on Vocational Learners

(Leargas, 2021) – show that placement and mobility projects act as an accelerated route to the acquisition of these soft (Transversal in this context) skills. Two key recommendations from the Tracer Study (Leargas, 2021) related to the introduction of a project-based learning element to mobility placements to mitigate any reported disengagement of participants from the mobility experience; and that participants would benefit from greater guidance on how to present the value of their experience. This would refer both to structured reflection and support to complete the Europass platform (Leargas, 2021). Both providers, who had direct experience of sending students on transnational placement, and the graduates themselves who had engaged with either short or longer-term placement articulated strongly to the benefit of this type of activity. The findings indicated that Soft Skills needed to be taught or facilitated in context.

‘Phenomenally, ..., no learner comes back having had reduced skills having gone on an Erasmus project. You know, [...] they would all have enhanced skills, because from negotiating, you know, in a foreign language, from finding their way, from, you know, working with other people, from leadership skills, working with other people when they’re there, from, you know, interpersonal skills’ [PI-12].

An interesting point in regard to the impact and benefit of transitional placement is that the benefit accruing to the young participant is often not fully recognised by them until a significant period of time has elapsed and they can look back and reflect on the benefit. Many have identified their placement/exchange as a pivotal moment in their lives, three to five years after the fact. This highlights the challenge for FET in that they usually only have the learner for a period of one year. Therefore, gathering some medium-term impact data can be difficult.

When learners are on placement, they are learning their Soft Skills while carrying out their role. They are being guided, mentored, and coached by a member of staff who contextualises their learning for them and with them. The reflective practice activities undertaken during the placement which form part of the assessment submission – reflective journal – is a way of the learner to chart their development during the placement.

‘So, they do personal and professional, supervision.....there’s actually a book even on supervision and leadership in childcare. And that covers, you know, communication, professional practice, it covers organisation, it covers curriculum, the importance of play, child-centred approaches, interactions [PI-12]

However, relative to the 200,000 annual FET participants, very few get the opportunity to undertake intercultural mobility or placement. According to one provider participant, the opportunity needs to be mainstreamed and be made more visible: The ‘Benefit of international mobility activity / work placement is not visible. Very *challenging to move this practice out into the mainstream’ [PI-10].*

Given that such positive benefits accrue to those experiencing fewer opportunities, it begs the question why has there not been more aggressive investment in intercultural education and opportunity for FET as there has been for Erasmus in higher education.

'Why hasn't there been investment? '.. is a question I've asked myself. Why isn't there the same investment in a FET learner having an international experience as there has been in Erasmus Higher Ed?' [PI-10].

Apprenticeship was seen from a policy perspective as offering an important opportunity as an avenue for teaching Soft Skills. The apprenticeship curriculum is reviewed at intervals to check for relevance and over the last few years, Soft Skills has been gaining recognition within the curriculum evidenced by the addition of modules on communication and teamwork. Project-based learning, challenge-based learning, integrated teaching was piloted by one interviewee with positive results who posits that this is the way forward: *'It's[communication and teamwork] quite well structured into apprenticeship and it's identified as something that's necessary. So actually, apprenticeship is a good model for looking at it, I think' [PO-16].*

Youthreach received very positive feedback through the research into the relevance of their programmes and how well the graduates were prepared for progression routes. Many of those who drop out of college do so because they are not prepared for the reality of that environment. Youthreach was highlighted as being effective in giving their learners the necessary skills to manage progression by discussing the learning to learn competence and delivering study skills programme [PI-11].

One participant who works in the youth sector points out that the non-formal education setting has the freedom to use creative methods, allowing space and time to enable the learner to absorb these skills. The youth worker is free from the constraint of curriculum as is reported by FET tutor respondents:

But it's one of the things that has struck me for the twenty-two/three years that I have been around Léargas in some shape or form is why the hell isn't nonformal methodology much more prevalent and pervasive through the entire education system?' [PI-11].

As has been reported in chapter 5, Soft Skills can be elusive to learners within levels 1-3 who experience a lack of confidence and may not always recognise the Soft Skills that they may already possess. They need guidance and encouragement through group work, peer work and social learning to share experiences and recognise their own achievements. This can be a very powerful learning experience and confidence builder for this type of learner.

More recently, education institutions are moving away from the traditional paradigm of teaching

these skills as context independent to a more human-centric approach where the context is central, and the skills are integrated into the core subjects/modules being taught. Evidence shows that across the FET participants in this study, there is agreement that Soft Skills need to be taught in context. Cimatti (2016) suggests that the context cannot be separated from the acquisition of Soft Skills, as individuals express their Soft Skills in relation to their environment – either home or work. She also suggests that Soft Skills be taught from primary school and even earlier within the family unit. This latter point has been countered by one research participant who works into communities with fewer opportunities and considers that placing the responsibility for the development of these skills with family or parents would further marginalise these young people where they themselves are often the carers for parents experiencing addiction and other challenges. She calls this assumption ‘middle-class privilege’ [PI-11] and it acts as a reminder to us all about our biases and assumptions.

6.4 Conclusion

Findings show that the teaching of Soft Skills needs to be undertaken in an applied context; this is what appears to be most effective for Soft Skills development and there was strong consensus on this from employer, provider, and policy perspectives. There was consensus from providers on the teaching of Soft Skills online, asserting that the online environment was suboptimal as a medium for teaching Soft Skills as much of the sensory data was unavailable because of the constraints of online [PI-08]. This needs to be addressed as the future of work migrates to a blended model (Diana, Rahmah and Rofiki, 2022). While 80% of tutors who responded to the questionnaire indicated that they were confident to teach Soft Skills, they also indicated that they had received little or no training to do so [FETQ].

The National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD, 2021) produced a discussion document on the FET College of the Future which proposes blended services depending on the needs of each region. NAPD suggests a single unified system of FET consisting of strategies to promote skills building; Inclusion, and pathways all bound within a modern integrated administration and management structure (NAPD, 2021).

A research participant with experience in Guidance for FET contends that it will be important to assist the person explore their own potential.

‘So, career management skills I would suggest need to be career management skills ...are the type of skills that we’re talking about, which are the elements of self- awareness and self-development and capacity-building within the individual, understanding who I am, where I’m placed, and how that extends into my capacity in a variety of settings. So, career management skills is what I would suggest needs to be pursued as a core piece of delivery

and that does not exist [PO-15]’.

The National FET Strategy (SOLAS, 2020) identifies as a strategic objective the development of a new framework for levels 5 and 6 with at least 30% of these new programmes being work-based or having a placement component, there will also be different mechanisms of delivery and CPD for staff.

‘The confusing array of vocationally focused programmes in FET, with apprenticeships, traineeships, evening training, specific skills training and PLCs offered in two very distinct settings (training centres and FE colleges), must be replaced by a new Level 5 and Level 6 proposition. This will have a core brand, focused on the discipline/the career and NFQ level, and be linked to regional skills needs and clear employment or progression outcomes’ (SOLAS, 2020, p. 40).

This aligns with the current research findings around the value of project-based-learning, integrated teaching, and transnational placement.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This chapter presents the conclusion and recommendations that resulted from the analysis and discussion of findings through an exploratory case study approach. This section offers recommendations that emerged from the findings and identifies areas and questions for future research.

7.1 Research question

The main aim of this research was to establish and identify the priority Soft Skills for the future of work. This research was entitled: An exploratory study of the priority Soft Skills for the future of work and the implications for FET in Ireland. The research question was as follows:

What are the priority Soft Skills for the future of work?

The exploration of this topic led to a number of sub-questions:

1. What is the definition of Soft Skills?
2. What are the most valuable Soft Skills in order of priority?
3. How can FET optimally teach these priority Soft Skills?

Across the literature and the research participant responses, there is acknowledgement of the importance of Soft Skills to the future of work. The recognition of the value of Soft Skills results from the experience of rapid change in the work environment, and the disconnection and isolation experienced by employees of remote working. There is a need for employers, and managers in particular, to have better levels of Soft Skills and be better skilled to carry out wellbeing conversations with their team members.

7.2 Nomenclature

Defining Soft Skills presented a challenge, in that there was no consensus around a definition in either the literature or in the current research findings. Nomenclature is, therefore, problematic with different terminology used to describe Soft Skills depending on the sector, field or participant type. For example, those involved in FET referred to Soft Skills as either Transversal Skills or Transferable Skills. Others referred to them as life-skills, human skills and some sectors did not use the term Soft Skills at all. The formation of a definition is frustrated by what Marin-Zapata (2021, p.1) highlights as theoretical dispersion and methodological inconsistency, giving rise to a substantial body of literature that does produce a clear definition. What is clear from the literature is that sector-specific terms used for Soft Skills are understood by those in that sector,

for example, the term Transversal Skills is fully understood within FET.

There was a convergence of Soft Skills and emotional intelligence in the responses of research participants, whereby some described Soft Skills as synonymous with emotional intelligence, with others identifying specific Soft Skills, such as listening or self-awareness, which are also a sub-set of emotional intelligence competency.

Soft Skills needs a different name, one that is immediately comprehensible to all, to bring clarity and common understanding to the discussion. It is suggested here arising out of the work of Parlamis & Monnot, (2019), that 'Core Capabilities' could be a good starting point as a substitution for the term Soft Skills. Parlamis & Monnot (2019) suggest C.O.R.E. as an acronym for *Competence in Organisational and Relational Effectiveness*. Although the acronym is too focused on the world of work and would require adaptation for FET and other settings, it is relatable, broader, and focuses on competence. The acronym and approach uses C.O.R.E as a substitute for 'soft' in order to eliminate negative connotations associated with 'soft'. The term Soft Skills is deeply embedded in the lexicon and has a multitude of alternatives which are context dependent.

There is a need for a clear and agreed definition to be developed. The research participants agree in broad terms what constitutes Soft Skills but a deeper investigation into how this could be classified, captured, and succinctly expressed would constitute a positive contribution to the understanding of Soft Skills.

SOLAS in their document on the progress made in Strategic Performance Agreements with the ETBs (2022) describe transversal skills as highly transferable skills 'that allow learners to integrate and engage effectively with society'. Transversal skills were included under "Fostering Inclusion", one of twelve system targets for FET in 2022. Fostering Inclusion has three subcategories of Transversal Skills, Widening Participation and Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) (p.4).

Graduates reported ad hoc provision of Soft Skills teaching across the whole of their educational journey. Soft Skills were mostly addressed during Transition Year and specifically as part of the 'mini-company' project. Within FET levels 5 & 6, Soft Skills provision was most evident within the Communications modules and those modules that had a work placement element. Tutors reported good and creative Soft Skills training taking place as part of the Personal Development modules of Levels 1-4. There is very little reported by Graduates on their experience of Soft Skills training at tertiary level with the exception of preparation for work-based placement or pre-departure training for an Erasmus+ exchange.

There was little support for tutors or teachers to develop their own capability to teach Soft Skills.

Continuous Professional Development within FET was reported to be currently 100% focused on STEM subjects. The need for CPD to prepare tutors to teach Soft Skills is acknowledged by the sector but complicated by the issue of contractual precarity for tutors and the requirement to undertake CPD in their own time and at their own expense. Mclaughlin (2018) has shown Erasmus+ funded intercultural exchange (mobility) projects for staff – where tutors can exchange good practice with their equivalent in a partner institution - to be very effective in developing Soft Skills, growing professional confidence and enhancing college-based leadership.

While the environment of the future workplace is expected to continue in a state of almost constant flux, it is the acquisition of, and competency in, Soft Skills that will help the individual navigate a rapidly changing and uncertain environment. Employers are now identifying Soft Skills as more important for work with some adopting the mantra *Hire for Fit but Train for Skills*, while graduates are more focused on the hard skills (Succhi & Canovi, 2019).

7.3 Priority Soft Skills for the Future of Work

Priority Soft Skills have been identified by research participants as: *Communication, Adaptability, Self-awareness, Empathy, Listening, Emotional Intelligence and Resilience*. These skills are classified into two categories: *intrapersonal or intrinsic* and *interpersonal or performative* which reflects the difference in focus between who we are and what we do and these skills are neither domain nor practice specific.

Much of the literature asserts that employer/provider collaboration needs to improve considerably to ensure Soft Skills are embedded into the academic and vocational programmes of study to guarantee that graduates are fully work-ready. While in practical terms, this may be effective, the balance of responsibility for the provision of Soft Skills needs to be carefully negotiated. It is undesirable to have education positioned in servitude to the workplace.

Education has a broader, deeper purpose than providing the skills pipeline for the world of work. The purpose of Education is to realise the potential of an individual, thus enabling them to make informed choices about their lives. Therefore, it is suggested that those with responsibility for education and training policy place equal emphasis on the philosophical underpinnings of education, especially Freirean principles of critical pedagogy, as a means of developing the whole person as is currently put on skills acquisition and development for the world of work. Soft Skills fall into that broader category of life-enhancing and enabling skills which impact beyond the workplace.

7.4 Teaching and Learning of Soft Skills

All FET research participants agreed that Freirean principles of critical pedagogy facilitate the type of teaching and learning needed for the acquisition of Soft Skills for the learner. There was a clear assertion from the research that Soft Skills need to be taught in an applied setting. Teaching strategies need to be context specific and involve multiple stakeholders: providers, employers, peers, mentors and other knowledgeable adults all combine to determine the best methodological approach for developing these skills in the learner. The research highlighted an integrated approach to teaching Soft Skills identifying the benefits and challenges of this approach in the current context of FET. Other approaches included Social and Emotional Learning, Project-based, experiential learning and apprenticeship as possible routes to effective Soft Skills delivery. A challenge for FET relates to the short timelines, as learners generally spend one academic year on a FET programme and these types of skills are slow to acquire, require iteration and behavioural or mindset shift. Placement and intercultural learning opportunities have been highlighted in the research as an effective way to acquire these skills. Feedback from such experiences is very positive and supports the strategic goal to include a placement element in 30% of FET modules.

Research participants indicated that learning outcomes and the evidence-gathering required to support assessment, especially at levels 5 and 6, drive the content that is taught within the classroom. There is a need to consider different success metrics for the recognition and assessment of Soft Skills. The development of *Minimum Intended Module Learning Outcomes* (MIMLO's) and Micro-credentials are positive moves toward flexibility, but educators will need to consider longer timelines, more practice-based, integrated and modelled approaches to teaching and learning of Soft Skills

FET tutors require upskilling and training in order to deliver impactful Soft Skills education and training. The FET system suffers from what it calls '*The Tyranny of Language*' (NAPD, 2021), in much the same way as Soft Skills does. The multiple titles, confusion of emphasis and acronyms can obscure the ethos, values and skills development in FET; the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) vision document on the FET College of the Future describes:

'Is it education or training? Student, trainee, or learner? Adult education, community education, formal and informal sectors? Beneficiaries or learners? Further or higher education? Academic or vocational? It is a bewildering array for many of us working in the FET system' (p. 9).

'FET as described by SOLAS (2019) in holistic and learner- centred terms:

'FET is unique. FET is for everyone. It is available in every community in Ireland, and offers every individual, regardless of any previous level of education, a pathway to take them as far as they want to go' (Maloney, 2010, p. 165).

Given the breadth, scope, and reach of FET provision, it would appear to be a favourable context for the concerted, innovative, and structured provision of Soft Skills.

7.5 Recommendations

Below are the recommendations deriving from this study:

Policy

- It is recommended that SOLAS and ETBI work in collaboration with experts in FET and relevant stakeholders, including learners to make clear what constitutes Soft Skills and provide a relevant classification and definition.

Practice

- It is recommended that FET students have the opportunity to participate in one intercultural placement/mobility experience at a minimum when participating in programmes of longer than one year. This experience could be debriefed with the European partner (in situ at placement site) mentors, home college tutor and could include structured reflective practice. This would require QQI, other accreditation bodies and providers responsible for the delivery of awards and programmes, to collaborate.
- It is recommended that programmes focused on personal development and Soft Skills development be designed for FET levels 5 and 6, so that Soft Skills are taught in context as part of a specific award or subject area.
- It is recommended that innovative teaching methodologies, for example, Social & Emotional Learning; Project-based learning and Integrated teaching models be piloted and incorporate more fully a structured reflective practice module as part of the assessment that would help the learner, chart, capture and evaluate their learning experience.
- It is recommended that FET provide comprehensive CPD for teachers and tutors to deliver Soft Skills training with a specific focus on the teacher as facilitator.

Work setting

- It is recommended that employers focus on providing Soft Skills training to enhance

the performance and professionalism of their employees. This will require HR and Learning and Development to work in close collaboration with senior management to anticipate skill needs. Managers will have a role to play in on-the-job training to develop Soft Skills. This is usually done via coaching so companies will need to engage with the provision of coaching training for managers.

- It is recommended that strategic consultation and collaboration between Industry/Provider/Learner take place to identify the key skills currently considered absent in entry-level graduates and identify the priority skills as they emerge.
- It is recommended that future educational research on Soft Skills could focus on the three key elements of training design, methodology and assessment.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Plain Language Statement

Project Title: An exploratory study of the importance of Soft Skills in the context of Further Education and the Future Workplace

Under: School of Policy and Practice, DCU Institute of Education, DCU St. Patrick's Campus, Drumcondra, Dublin 9.

Researchers: Marie Cleary marie.thirdspace@gmail.com 087 8159343

Aim of the Research

The purpose of this research is to explore the provision of Soft Skills education and training through existing frameworks to meet the needs of the future workplace. According to the World Economic Forum (2018) people are being educated for jobs that don't yet exist, for organisations that will form and reform many times over the course of their existence and for products and services which have not yet been invented. Therefore, education for specific purposes is losing its relevance in the modern world, people will need to continually learn, unlearn and relearn, upskill and reskill all through their working lives which will now go on much longer than before – up to 70 years of age. The research will focus on the models and frameworks for teaching and assessment of Soft Skills and investigate what will be required to prepare the workforce for the future workplace.

Involvement in the Research Study

As a potential participant in this research study, you will be asked to participate in an interview or focus group. The interviews will be recorded. You may be asked to complete a questionnaire. Your estimated time commitment should be no more than one hour. Every effort will be made to efficiently and concisely provide information and support without impacting on your daily life.

This research study should not incur any risk on your behalf either in your professional or home life. It is hoped that the findings of this research through your active participation will provide useful information and models and frameworks for the teaching and assessment of Soft Skills. It is hoped

that your experience, comments and suggestions will inform how the needs of employers will align with the teaching of Soft Skills to future proof the employability of learners in FET.

The research will conform to all applicable legislation including the Freedom of Information Act, and the Data Protection Act. All personal information will remain confidential and anonymous and will be preserved solely for use in the FET evaluation report and research papers that are appropriate and relevant to the quality of the placement programme. All data will be kept on a password protected USB for one year only.

All involvement in this research study is voluntary and a participant may withdraw at any point. There will be no penalty for withdrawing before all stages of the research study have been completed.

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person,

please contact:

The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000, e-mail [rec@dcu.i](mailto:rec@dcu.ie)

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Interview Questions: Employer Perspective

1. What is understood by the term Soft Skills - what is the range of skills included under this title?
2. Why and how are they important for the future workplace/ Are Soft Skills as important as hard skills in the workplace - how is this evidenced?
3. What skills are needed in the business – what are the most important Soft Skills?
4. How important are Soft Skills to the success and progression of the employee in the company?
5. How much of your training budget is assigned to Soft Skills development (%)
6. Are you experiencing a skills gap? How work-ready are new employees and graduates for the demands of your workplace?
7. What is the generational profile in the business for example, how many generations present? – do you notice a difference in the Soft Skills capability or needs of each generation?
8. What has been the impact of Covid-19 and the implications for the future of work in your business?

Interview Questions: Provider Perspective

1. What is understood by the term Soft Skills - what is the range of skills included?
2. Why and how are they important for the future workplace/ Are Soft Skills as important as hard skills in the workplace - how is this evidenced?
3. What are the drivers for increased focus on Soft Skills within FET policy at this time?
4. Where are they located within the system?
5. What types of teaching methods are used to teach Soft Skills/what methods are optimum?
6. What supports are provided to trainers and tutors within the system to teach Soft Skills?
7. In a mixed education employee profile (graduates/levels QQI levels 1-6) - is the emphasis on Soft Skills development equally distributed across each employee category?
8. What do you see as the different Soft Skills competency in each generation within the workplace?
9. What is the expected impact of Covid-19 on the future direction of work?

Appendix C: Questionnaires

03/04/2022, 10:33 Introduction to the FET Soft Skills Survey for FET tutors

Introduction to the FET Soft Skills Survey for FET tutors

This survey seeks to establish the position of Soft Skills within the FET system. Soft Skills are defined in many ways but are most often described as 'non-technical' skills; people skills or uniquely human capabilities. This questionnaire also seeks to establish: a) what you understand soft skills to be and b) the level and nature of the FET investment in support and development of FET tutors in the area of Soft Skills.

***Required**

1. Please confirm you have read the plain language statement and that you consent to participate in this research by clicking on 'yes' below
Mark only one oval.
 Yes

Biographical Information

2. Name

3. email address *

4. Gender *
Mark only one oval.
 Female
 Male
 Prefer not to say
 Other: _____

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1B8N6J7N_pRE_Ku2MeW7L_d8wC1V7P8K750K33S3evudt 1/1

5. How many years have you worked in FET? *

6. What qualifications do you hold? *

7. Do you hold teaching or training qualifications e.g. training of trainers; PME; Initial Teacher Education in FET or any specific qualification in Instructional Design? *

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

8. Please elaborate on the qualifications you hold

9. Do you have any qualifications or practice sciences to use psychometrics, personality indicators or other tools? *

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

10. If you hold qualifications or licences to use psychometrics or other tools, please identify what those instruments are below

Occupation Information

11. What is your role or job title?

12. Please name the types of settings you work in e.g. Adult Education centre; PLC; Youthreach; Library service; CTC etc

13. What is the status of your employment?

Mark only one oval.

- Full-time permanent
- Contract of Indefinite Duration
- Part-time
- Other: _____

18. What do you think are the most important soft skills for your learners?

19. Rate these soft skills in the scale of importance to success in the workplace *

Mark only one oval per row

	Most important	Very important	Moderately important	Somewhat important	Not important
Listening	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Adaptability	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Resilience	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Self-awareness	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Self-confidence	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Optimism	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Critical Thinking	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Empathy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Your understanding of Soft skills

20. Soft skills are often defined as those non-technical skills. How would you describe soft skills. Specifically, what do you consider them to be. *

21. Describe a person with high levels of soft skills? What characteristics would they model? What are you likely to see in their behaviour? *

22. Why are soft skills desirable or advantageous? *

23. Identify your own 3 best developed soft skills and explain why you chose these? *

24. Identify your least developed soft skill? *

25. How confident are you to teach Soft Skills within your programmes? 1 = low confidence and 5 = high confidence

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

26. Have you received any Continuous Professional Development (CPD) in respect of Soft Skills?

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

27. If yes, please describe the programme content and duration

28. Have you received any Continuous Professional Development in respect of Facilitation Skills?

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

33. From your experience, please describe the nature of Soft Skills as it relates to the different levels of QQI awards e.g. levels 1/2; 3/4 and 5/6?

34. Do you think that soft skills should be more clearly defined and taught within the QQI levels 1 - 6?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

35. If yes, do you see the need to build the level of sophistication in soft skills from levels 1/2 through 3/4 and 5/6? Please comment below:

36. In your opinion, in what way does the FET system need to change to assist tutors/teachers in delivering soft skills education and training?

37. In your opinion, in what ways does the FET system need to change to meet the needs of the learner?

38. In your opinion, in what way does the FET system need to change to meet future workplace demands?







39. Any other comment you would like to make

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Google Forms

Graduate Questionnaire

11/06/2022, 09:51 Soft Skills for the Future Workplace - Google Forms

Soft Skills for the Future Workplace

[Questions](#) [Responses](#) [Settings](#)

Section 1 of 3

Soft Skills Introduction

Soft Skills are often described as those 'people' skills or non-technical skills. These soft skills are the subject of this questionnaire. Thank you for participating in this research.

Please confirm your informed consent to participate in this research by clicking 'yes' that you've read the plain language statement and informed consent form







Yes

After section 1: [Continue to next section](#)

Section 2 of 3

Contact Information

Description (optional)

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/14Jfua0b4tW7cTT0nqJAMjdygD0u83-c75w8w8d>

Short-answer text

email address

Short-answer text

Gender

- Female
- Male
- Prefer not to say
- Other...

How old are you?

Short-answer text

What university/college did you attend? *

Long-answer text

What was your course of study? *

Long-answer text



Long-answer text

After section 2 Continue to next section

Section 3 of 2

Educational Background & Soft Skills

Soft Skills are often defined as: the character traits and interpersonal skills that characterize a person's relationships with other people.

Do you remember soft skills/transversal skills being addressed/taught during your secondary school - perhaps in career guidance or placement conversations?

Yes

No

If soft skills were addressed in secondary school, please explain how and in what context were they taught or modelled.

Long-answer text

Did you do Transition Year during secondary

Yes

No

If you did transition year, were soft skills addressed in any way e.g. Gaisce award or when



Long-answer text

Did you do an internship either during college or after graduation?

Yes

No

If you did an internship, were soft skills addressed in any way?

Long-answer text

After section 3 Continue to next section

Section 4 of 7

Your understanding of Soft skills

Description (optional)

Soft skills are often defined as those non-technical skills. How would you describe soft skills. Specifically, what do you consider them to be.

Long-answer text

Describe a person with high levels of soft skills? What characteristics would they model? What are you likely to see in their behaviour?

Long-answer text



Why are soft skills desirable or advantageous?

Long-answer text

Identify your own 3 best developed soft skills and explain why you chose these? *

Long-answer text

Identify your least developed soft skill? *

Short-answer text

After section 4 - Continue to next section

Section 3 of 5

Soft Skills in the Workplace

Description (optional)

Are soft skills as important as hard skills? Please explain your answer

Long-answer text

Rate these soft skills in the scale of importance to success in the workplace *

Listening, Adaptable, Resilience, Soft skills, Self-conf., Optimism, Critical T., Empathy

Most im...



Moderat...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Somewh...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Minimal...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Do you think there is a link between personality and good soft skills?

Long-answer text

Describe some of the characteristics of the future workplace - what will be different post

Long-answer text

What soft skills do you think will differentiate successful people in the post-Covid workplace?

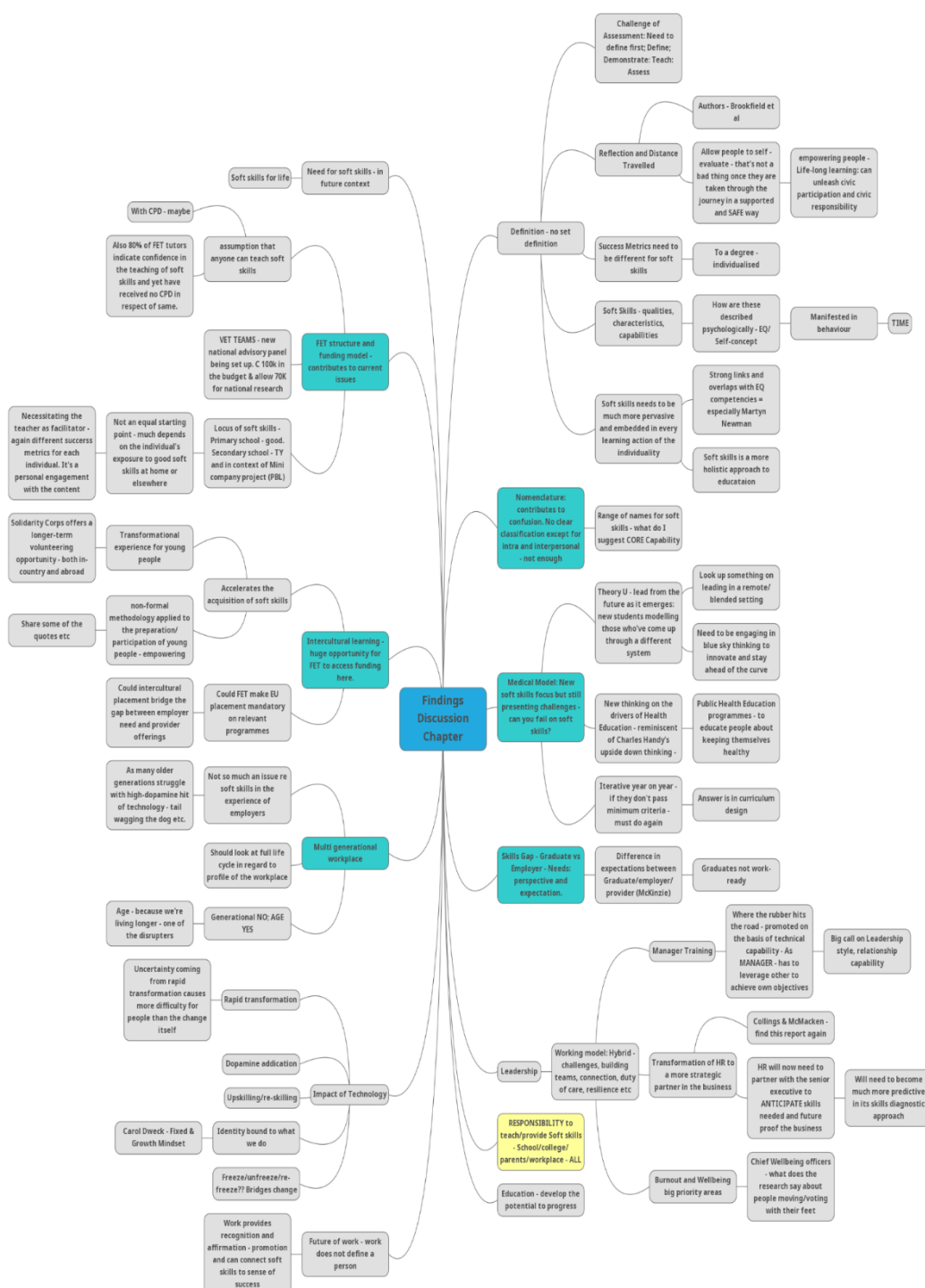
Long-answer text

In the post-Covid world of work what are the key soft skills that employers will look

Long-answer text



Appendix D: Coding Samples



I think for all we have embraced, we'll say, technology people who were very discomfited by it at the beginning have made the leap, you know, some earlier than others, but eventually who've made the leap	In the context of Covid, all have had to embrace technology Even those who are uncomfortable by tech have made the 'leap'	Covid caused technology embrace for everyone Those who are uncomfortable have also made the leap		Rapid acquisition of tech skills for everyone driven by Covid
They've gone way out of their comfort zone and they are vastly upskilled in the whole use of technology. And that would be a good thing.	People out of comfort zone and vast upskilled as a result. A good thing	huge upskilling as a result of Covid - not easy but good	Huge upskilling	Everyone made the Leap
for all the technology and all the money that was invested in it and all the different platforms that people have been exposed to it hasn't in any way compensated for the lack of the live environment, face-to-face interaction	In spite of all investment in tech platforms, it hasn't compensated for the face-to-face environment.	All tech investment and migration to online has not compensated for face to face environment	No substitute for in-person environment	
And it's the social cues.	The difference between online & face to face lies in the social cues	Online vs Face-to-face is because of the social cues	Social cues are the difference between online and in-person	
what we're all calling the water cooler moments	Name given to the face to face random interaction	Value of the random interaction - in person		
Even if you're not talking it's other communication pieces. And there is something lost in this, you know, very deliberate way of interacting with somebody.	Face to face environment even if not talking - other communication going on. Something is lost in the online environment	Connection lost in the online environment	Random non-verbal communication still ahead of online environment	
when you're physically sitting in a room with someone you have to sit and listen to them and talk to them.	When in the presence of someone, you have to listen and pay attention	Focus of attention different when in the presence of someone.	better listening is required when in-person	
When people are on these things they're sending a couple of texts, they might have a sectioned screen, every now and again you'll see their eyes darting here and here.	When online, people can send texts, be distracted and doing other work i.e. not fully present	Distraction of online		
People are doing other things. they're not necessarily committed to the interaction there's a lot more scope for—it's riskier for want of a better way. It's a risky kind of an environment, because even in this translation things are lost.	People online - no always committed to the interaction - doing other things	Online allows people to disengaged		
They're lost in a way that you can kind of soften it if you're physically in the room together or—	Online interaction carries some risk in terms of communication impact	Communications risk in the online environment	Comms in the online environment	
And the other thing is you see this in a frame. You don't see the whole person.	Online loses the opportunity to moderate communication - can soften tone if in the presence of the other person online comms also compromised by only have the small visual frame	Can't easily moderate comms in the online environment	More modulation of the tone possible in the in person environment	
I think they are the capabilities to do the human elements of work, work in its broadest terms that's interaction or skills. So, you know, like, you might say what are soft skills? Well, they're not the hard skills.	What are soft skills - the capabilities to do the human elements of work	SS are the human elements of work		Constituent element of Soft Skills
But you might look at hard skills in terms of things being sort of task-based and you're talking transactional, with a product or a hard output at the end of it.	Whether interaction or skills - they're soft not hard skills hard skills more transactional, task focused with hard produce as output	Hard skills more transactional focused on output	Soft not hard skills	Contrast with hard skills
But I think the soft skills are all the pieces that bring the humanity to—I don't mean humanity now in terms of empathy humanity, but I mean the pieces that we need humans to bring. we're all obsessed with the AI and the, you know, opposite roles and all this, but like AI is never going to completely take over any entire role.	Soft skills are the pieces that bring the humanity AI big on everyone's agenda but never going to fully take over the entirety of any role	SS are the human elements of work AI - bit on the agenda	Human elements Can't mimic or overtake the human element	
I think it's that whole social piece. I think intuitiveness. I think it's the humanity but so we launched that in December and then Covid hit, obviously, in February. And I was saying, you know, when we now look at what's the role of learning in the workplace, which I was saying, Jesus, I wonder where were we.	Soft skill = the social aspect, intuition and human factors	Pre-Covid Collings & McMackin - published L&D for the future or work	Repot on L&D in futrue workplace	
That whole thing about finding a north star and purpose and obviously the digitisation of work. And we know that the digitisation of work is a thing and we have been catapulted into that just for a second beyond where we ever thought we would be, you know.	Pre Covid, launched a report Collings & McMackin on role of L&D in workplace of the future	Focus was to find direction and purpose of L&D in digital age	L&D will need purpose redefined in digital age	HR/L&D in digital age- repurposed
that all of a sudden, you know, senior leaders were in reactive mode. They made quick, fast decisions because they were in reactive mode. But in parallel there was huge fear among workforces and—	Leadership reactive during Covid. Making fast decision but a lot of fear in the workforce	Purpose of L&D in digital age Covid cased reactivity in Leadership characterised by fast decision-making based in fear	Covid impact on leadership	
And in the context of LD then they turned to LD for some of the solutions.	Leaders looking to L&D for solutions		Leaders looking for L&D solutions	

there was a sense of downtime. They looked for learning and development to be positioned in that time in order to be ready for when things would move on. So learning and development was really a key part and I would think that's something we need to come back to. Like I think learning and development never had the opportunity it has now. leaders are now really in this—sort of they have to design a way of working and a work environment and an organisation for which they have no template for now, nothing. So now learning and development has to step in and say, 'We can help with that.	In the initial slowing around Covid, leaders looked to position L&D to be ready to activate when things changed Learning & Development a key role during Covid - has a significant opportunity as never before Leaders had to design a totally new way of working for which there was no precedent. Opportunity for L&D to step up and offer guidance	Strategic thinking around L&D for post covid L&D really important during Covid New way of working - no precedent	Opportunity for L&D - key role very significant post Covid		
like the learning and development people themselves came back and said the skill that they most wanted to improve now was their coaching and mentoring skills.	From IITD skillsnet survey of L&D professionals, the skills they most wanted to develop were coaching and mentoring	IITD skillsnet survey of L&D professionals the skills most needed - Coaching & Mentoring	Coaching & Mentoring - key skills		
how learning needs would be addressed, like as in terms of methodology and that, in '21 and in '22, and, you know, like there was almost half of the content was going to happen in '21 in a solely online—and in fact well more than half between an online environment and a tutor-led online environment and then when you bring in the self-directed piece online. But in 2022 that online piece came back to like really small, you know, really small percentages They need to see people. Like that's what people would say to you is the biggest problem with this, the lack of human interaction The majority of people are now tech-functioning. You know, so that's no good anymore now. that doesn't distinguish anybody from anything else. so now we're back to the 'what else can you do?' And I think that's where the soft skills could come in, you know. But the actual development of the skills for yourself—I could read a book on lots of things, but you have to actually be in a live environment where you have opportunities to practice those and refine them and understand the consequences of deploying your—they're not necessarily—well, deploying the skills maybe or deploying your approaches in certain ways to see the consequences of that.	From skillnet survey how learning needs would be addressed - 2021 online but in 2022 online percentages were small. People need the human connection and interaction People are now technology enabled Tech enabled is not a differentiator anymore - we're all doing it Soft skill become the differentiator now - what else can you do	Human connection can't be substituted Tech enabled not a differentiator any more	Everyone now expected to have tech		
my rationale is what do I want this person to get out of this exchange soft skills in their broadest terms comes from role-modelling, live environments, practice, you know, opportunities. reflection is the piece that comes after that then. So whether you're reflecting in a coaching or mentoring environment or whether you're reflecting when you walk away and say, 'Why did I fucking say that?' So I think it comes with all those things, observation, reflection, refinement, feedback, lessons learned, you know. Brilliant intuition, brilliant judgment, great empathy, fantastic communicators, all of that kind of stuff. So I think there are people who are just good at it, by the way But often you find those people they're savvy and they have actually learned from their own interactions, you know. Totally the school of life you can moderate your soft skills, you know, you can refine your skills and reverse them into the context you're in, but it'll be very deliberate.	For the development of soft skills - needs the practice environment to review and refine Communication - what does the receiver understand the message to be Soft skills best acquired from good role modelling and live environments and practice opportunities	Soft skill acquisition - needs experiential or practice environment Experiential learning environment			
You know, you can moderate and refine your interactions in order to get good outcomes if the culture is strong or good. So relationship-building, empathy, all of these things they kind of hook one person into another in some way by reducing fear, by creating assurance of quality or whatever it might be. that all fits into the soft skills And the other thing about it is that to be able to, you know, to be able to change that depending on the person that you're talking to—so, you know, if you take it up to leaders then you could be in a—you've got all sorts of different people and you have to come at them in the different ways.	You can moderate and refine interactions to get good outcomes Relationship building, empathy all reduce fear and create assurance Being able to flex your style - that's soft skills in action	opportunity to refine interactions & get good outcomes Empathy and relationship building to reduce fear and create assurance Flexing your style - needs soft skills to do that	praxis Key components of learning Easier for some than other Empathy provides assurance		Employers hiring for fit and training for skills - emphasis on softs kills

but this year at the top of the pops, straight in at Number 1, wasn't even on the Top Ten last year, reskilling and upskilling.	Global learning sentiment survey asking what will be hot in L&D 2020 number 1 was reskilling and upskilling.	L&D soft skills survey - re-skilling & upskilling		
But I just I have to say, Marie, I think that's overplayed.	Thinks the generational issue is over played and on flimsy evidence	Intergeneration issue overplayed - evidence is flimsy		
And if you come back to some of the things we've been talking about here, I mean, there's loads of young people who have brilliant soft skills and there's old curmudgeons then who should know better and have learned nothing of refining their style over their lives, you know. I definitely, definitely think there are some people who have innate better soft skills than others.	Generational theory doesn't hold. Lots of young people have excellent soft skills and more experienced people need development	Lots of young people have great soft skills	Soft skills - not necessarily a generational issue	Young people more conversant on Mindset, mindfulness etc
. And role-modelling has a huge part to play, you know. And that's not just role-modelling in the workplace, it's role-modelling at home and all of that.	Some naturally better at soft skills - innate - that others	Innate ability re soft skills		
like I think resilience is something that deserves a bit more investigation.	Importance of role modelling in the acquisition of soft skills - not just in the workplace	Role modelling - has part to play in acquisition of soft skills		
the 2022 Deloitte human capital trend, they have a whole section on investing in resilient, like beyond reskilling.	Resilience is important and needs more investigation	Resilience is important		
I think there's a lot of things in that space now around mental health.	Deloitte 2022 HC report focus on investing in resilience - beyond reskilling	Investing in resilience beyond reskilling	Resilience being invested in by companies	
I'm under pressure right now so I need to have a particular type of resilience or I need to have resilience for this particular moment. But there's other people then who just seem to be able to take the slings and arrows and take whatever comes their way. They're neither high nor low and they have what you might call better coping skills type of thing, you know.	Resilience coupled a lot with mental health	Resilience coupled with mental health		
So I do think that it's to do with personality, but I think this is the role-modelling again.	Resilience in context - I'm under pressure - need to dig deep. Others just muddle through with better coping skills	People have different coping skills		
But I think there's way too much time spent telling people that their lives are really hard, really hard.	Resilience is connected to personality and its development required role modelling	Resilience is connected to personality	Role modelling	
I think people have nothing to—they've no parameters for their, you know—they've no parameters for how they're feeling. Like there's nobody saying, listen, right now it's bad, but to be honest, when something else happens it will be fine. The whole narrative now is about telling them that they feel terrible, telling them that their life is awful, and encouraging them to feel terrible and awful.	People getting messages about how hard life it - need to toughen up - it's anchoring the idea	Coping skills		
I think sometimes the soft skills of other people play a role in some people's resilience. So, you know, like I think that's where the soft skills of managers maybe come into play sort of in terms of—or even co-workers in terms of helping other people.	People have no parameters for how they feel - a lack of optimism			
Yeah, people are just, you know, are losing a bit of perspective. There are other people can deploy their soft skills to help—	Soft skill of others help developing the resilience of another	Soft skills of some people / developing the resilience of those around them		
I don't think resilience is a soft skill in itself, but I think the importance of having, you know, well-developed soft skills can significantly impact on other people's ability to help people	Importance of perspective	SS help people with perspective		
Because it's part of the mentoring thing. You know, they're [inaudible 00:45:11] an environment, I think.	Resilience is more than a soft skill but well developed soft skills very useful in helping others			
And listening, there's another one	Mentoring			
There was far greater empathy than there is now	Listening is a soft skill			
But I think there was much greater solidarity, empathy, the 'we're all in this together' and everybody had to be seen to lead out on 'we're all in this together'	Greater empathy in evidence before than now	40% drop in Empathy over the last 5 years Mary Collins		
employers are discovering this is actually really hard and would we have to do that bit as well	Solidarity and compassion in greater evidence now	Collective experience - more solidarity and compassion now		
But there's a whole soft skills piece for people who work on their own working at home.	Challenging to provide working from home policy that will work for everyone	Remote working - policy will be challenging	Soft skills competencies help people adjust to the challenges of working from home.	
There's a huge problem about the lack of tacit—the loss of - tacit knowledge, or maybe not even the loss of it, but more the inability to develop it.....	Soft skills piece for those working from home on their own.	Soft skill help with remote working		
But productivity is back on the table now, and it's all very well to say it's a performance	Resignation & churn - loss of tacit knowledge. Inability to sustain tacit knowledge			