

The Essential Role of Hard Skills and Soft Skills in Shaping the Success and Future of University Students' Education

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Abstract

This article explores the significance of both skill sets for university students, emphasizing how a balance between hard skills and soft skills leads to improved academic performance and enhanced employability. The article examines the interdependence of these skills, focusing on how students can develop both to navigate the complexities of the modern workforce. The integration of these competencies is crucial for fostering not only technical expertise but also emotional and social intelligence, enabling students to contribute meaningfully to their communities and professional environments. The article concluded that both hard skills and soft skills play essential roles in shaping well-rounded individuals capable of achieving success in educational and professional settings. Hard skills refer to specific, technical abilities and knowledge directly related to a particular field, such as proficiency in technology, mathematics, or scientific expertise. On the other hand, soft skills, also known as emotional intelligence, encompass interpersonal abilities such as communication, problem-solving, leadership, empathy, and self-regulation—all critical for effective teamwork and personal growth.

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Introduction

Most higher education institutions view graduates with high competency and those who have the opportunity to achieve success or a stable life as graduates with above-average grades or a high Grade Point Average (GPA); in other words, graduates who possess technical skills/hard skills (knowledge) that are above average (McKenzie, & Schweitzer, 2001). This reflects the belief that achieving high grades or technical abilities happens naturally, without considering the supporting factors that contribute to such achievements. However, more deeply, a person's ability to possess high knowledge is driven by motivation or by an individual's strong soft skills.

Technical intelligence or hard skills are not easily obtained but are made possible with the help of soft skills or the willingness to acquire them. A common misconception is that students who achieve the desired or high hard skills do so because of cunning or their ability to approach professors or seek attention, often referred to as nepotism, leading professors to give them high grades (Sedlak, 1997). This assumption is not entirely true, or it can be completely wrong, as it is nearly impossible and creates a reality or mindset that blames professors for not giving ethical assessments to their students. In this case, professors may be seen as making evaluations not based on clear and objective indicators but on outside influences. The truth is that achieving high hard skills is supported by having strong or adequate soft skills. How a student succeeds is clearly determined by both hard skills and soft skills. Students who possess both types of skills will stand out compared to those who only have one skill set.

The facts show that students who have balanced soft skills are able to motivate themselves to achieve high hard skills. Duckworth & Seligman (2005) found that self-discipline is a key component of soft skills that plays a more significant role in predicting academic performance than cognitive abilities alone. Students, as those who are being prepared to become professional educators and field experts in their respective fields, must possess soft skills that are developed

through various self-training processes and habits, which can tap into their potential for strong soft skills.

Hard Skill

A student is at a stage where hard skills are aligned with the direction of their career, meaning they are in the process of transforming themselves into workers or practitioners who possess technical intelligence (hard skills) and emotional intelligence (soft skills) in a balanced way. This stage can be seen as part of multiple intelligences, where students are expected to have a variety of skills to succeed in their field, both in the workforce and in creating job opportunities.

Dr. Howard Gardner, a researcher from Harvard and the pioneer of the multiple intelligence theory, proposed eight types of intelligence, which include:

1. *Linguistic intelligence*: the ability to manipulate and understand words effectively.
2. *Spatial intelligence*: having a strong imagination and the ability to visualize.
3. *Musical intelligence*: sensitivity to sounds, tones, and rhythms.
4. *Body-kinesthetic intelligence*: skilled in physical movement and handling objects.
5. *Logical-mathematical intelligence*: proficient in science and problem-solving through logic and numbers.
6. *Interpersonal intelligence*: the ability to understand and interact well with others, reading their thoughts and emotions.
7. *Intrapersonal intelligence*: self-awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses.
8. *Naturalist intelligence*: sensitivity to and understanding of nature and the environment.
9. *Spiritual Intelligence*: Awareness of the meaning of existence and one's relationship with the universe and its creator.

The eight intelligences, also known as multiple intelligences, are an expansion of brain intelligence (hard skills), emotional intelligence, and spiritual intelligence (soft skills). These three types of intelligence will be most beneficial to an individual when there is a balance in both the quality and quantity of each within the student's personality. When these intelligences are in harmony, they contribute to the holistic development of a student, allowing them to thrive in both personal growth and professional success.

According to Jessica Holbrook, hard skills are defined as “processes, procedures, and industry-specific jargon that are easy to measure and quantify. They are terms such as account management, talent acquisition and development, client retention, data management, project management, accounts receivable and payable, product support, and new business development.”

Based on this explanation, hard skills refer to the mastery of knowledge, technology, and technical skills related to a specific field of study. In other words, hard skills are technical abilities acquired in the classroom or laboratory, which can be measured in students through indicators such as GPA. The nature of hard skills is visible because there are tangible facts that represent them, such as the GPA on a diploma, certificates, and other official credentials.

Furthermore, Wikipedia explains that hard skills are “the hard skill/competence referring to job-specific abilities, and relevance will be about specific knowledge relating to ‘up-to-date’ systems.” This means that hard skills are the abilities related to specific and current knowledge, such as science, technology, and technical skills.

It is clear that hard skills refer to the mastery of knowledge in a particular field, which is reflected as an indicator in a student's GPA. Therefore, a student who possesses hard skills has technical abilities gained in the classroom and laboratory. A student with strong hard skills is one who is able to achieve high grades.

Soft Skill

According to the explanation of multiple intelligences, it is clear that the concept of soft skills is essentially an extension of what is known as emotional intelligence (EQ). Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to understand, manage, and express one's emotions, as well as the ability to recognize and influence the emotions of others. According to Mayer & Salovey (1997), they found that emotional intelligence (EQ) is closely connected to soft skills. It emphasizes the role of EQ in understanding, managing, and using emotions also effectively in social interactions.

Soft skills, which include communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and leadership, are grounded in emotional intelligence as they involve managing relationships, understanding social cues, and navigating complex social and professional environments effectively. Thus, soft skills are developed through emotional awareness and regulation, making EQ a crucial foundation for success in personal and professional life.

Emotional intelligence (EQ) is the ability to recognize, express, and manage emotions, both one's own and those of others, in a constructive way. It involves working together as a team with a focus on productivity rather than conflict, as well as the ability to motivate oneself. Additionally, emotional intelligence includes self-control, enthusiasm, and perseverance, along with the ability to motivate oneself and endure frustration. It involves controlling impulses and emotions, not overindulging in pleasures, regulating one's mood, and ensuring that stress does not hinder cognitive abilities. EQ also includes the ability to empathize with others, nurture relationships, resolve conflicts, and lead effectively.

This skill set is crucial for personal and professional success, as it enables individuals to navigate complex social environments, maintain mental resilience, and build positive, productive relationships with others.

Furthermore, emotional intelligence is the ability to control one's emotions when facing both pleasurable and painful situations. In other words, emotional intelligence involves the ability to recognize one's own emotions when they arise and to be able to identify those emotions with high sensitivity. This allows an individual to make decisions confidently and manage their emotions effectively. In this context, the attitude taken in making various choices—such as choosing a school, friends, profession, and even a life partner—can be greatly influenced by emotional intelligence.

Additionally, the ability to manage emotions refers to an individual's capability to control their feelings so that they do not explode and negatively impact their behavior. For instance, if someone is angry, they are able to control that anger well without letting it lead to actions that they might regret later. This self-regulation allows for more rational, calm decision-making and healthier emotional responses in challenging situations. This notion was found by Gross (2002), it explored the concept of emotion regulation, specifically how people can control their emotional responses.

In simple terms, emotional intelligence is the ability to feel and can be enhanced through practice. If we want to experience the sweetness of sugar, our tongue needs to taste a few grains of sugar. Our EQ won't improve if we just look at sugar and think about its sweetness. The importance of actual practice becomes clear when we need to feel the suffering of others.

Goleman (1995) explains that emotional intelligence (EQ) is the ability to recognize our own feelings and manage emotions well, both within ourselves and in relationships with others. A student's ability to appreciate themselves and others and understand the deepest feelings of people around them who follow established rules are all keys to success in their future. High EQ will help

a student build social relationships in family environments, workplaces, businesses, and social settings. For a student, emotional intelligence is a fundamental requirement because it fosters a dialogical, democratic, and participatory climate, which is essential for emotional maturity in understanding and accepting differences in ethnicity, religion, and culture. Without this, such differences can become sources of latent conflict. This skill allows a person to view pluralism as a richness and beauty rather than a challenge.

A student with good emotional intelligence or soft skills can be recognized through five basic components, as follows:

1. Self-awareness

This refers to the ability to recognize one's own emotions and understand the causes that trigger them. A student with strong self-awareness can evaluate themselves effectively, gaining insight that helps them take appropriate actions. Recognizing one's strengths and weaknesses encourages personal improvement in a positive direction. Once an individual understands themselves, they can continue their journey towards becoming the best version of themselves, achieving personal growth and quality development.

2. Self-regulation

A person with good self-awareness can better control their actions, making them more careful and thoughtful in decision-making. They will strive to avoid being impulsive. However, it's important to note that self-regulation doesn't mean hiding emotions, but rather choosing not to be controlled by them. It involves resisting the temptation to act solely based on emotions that bring temporary pleasure or satisfaction, which could ultimately be harmful and lead to dependency or losing sight of long-term goals.

3. Self-motivation

When things don't go according to plan, a person with high emotional intelligence doesn't ask, "What's wrong with me or us?" Instead, they ask, "What can we do to fix this problem?" In other words, the ability to self-motivate is the ability to encourage oneself to do something good and beneficial. This includes a sense of hope and high optimism, which fuel the motivation to engage in certain activities, such as studying. However, it's not just about having hope but also about taking positive actions that support achieving those hopes and desires. Self-motivation signals the understanding that our goals can be achieved and implies that there is a "journey" to be taken from the current position (Point of Departure, POD) to the desired destination (Point of Arrival, POA) within a set time frame. This means that students must remain focused on the goal they aim to achieve, directing their efforts toward that goal while ignoring distractions that won't help them reach it more efficiently or within the expected time. Without a proper time acceleration, consistent hard work and high motivation are essential for success.

4. Empathy

Empathy is the ability to recognize and understand the feelings of others and to feel what they are experiencing as though you were in their position. This skill nurtures a strong sense of brotherhood and creates beautiful harmony, as actions are carried out in ways that align with the feelings and circumstances of others. When empathy is present, individuals can respond to others with kindness, understanding, and support, fostering positive relationships and cooperation. This quality is especially important in collaborative environments, as it helps to ensure that one's actions are considerate and respectful of the emotions and perspectives of others.

5. Effective Relationship

The ability to build social relationships is synonymous with the ability to manage the emotions of others. Hallam (2020) mentioned that music helps students understand others and

provides opportunities for social interaction and emotional development. The ability to manage others' emotions helps develop high social skills, allowing an individual to have a broader and more positive social network.

With these four abilities, an individual can communicate effectively with others. The focus is placed more on solving problems together rather than unnecessary confrontations that could be avoided. A person with high emotional intelligence has constructive goals in mind. In contrast, a student with low emotional intelligence may be characterized by high emotional reactions, acting impulsively based on their emotions, and lacking sensitivity to others' feelings.

A person with low emotional intelligence often tends to hurt or harbor animosity toward others, viewing them as rivals or unable to accept the presence of others. Such individuals are more likely to experience stress and frustration when seeing others in a higher position, hindering harmonious relationships and cooperation among peers.

Students, in their daily activities, are almost always involved with feelings and emotions. As such, every task or assignment requires a high level of emotional intelligence. Specifically, students need high emotional intelligence because they represent organizations, interact with professors who possess far more knowledge, and, according to the current curriculum, are actively engaged in 75% of their learning process. This requires the development of strong soft skills to help students understand their responsibilities and rights, as well as to enhance their scientific abilities (hard skills).

Emotional intelligence impacts every aspect of a student's academic activities. When working alone, success largely depends on one's level of discipline and motivation. For example, if a student is given only the broad title of a topic and the rest of the understanding of the topic is their responsibility, a student lacking emotional intelligence (or soft skills) might only complete the task without truly understanding the topic. When exam time comes, this lack of understanding will likely result in unsatisfactory grades.

Peter Salovey and John Mayer (1990) in Shapiro (1997) explained that the emotional quality essential for success is the ability to recognize one's own emotions. Sternberg and Salovey (in Shapiro, 1997) also define emotional intelligence as the ability to recognize one's own emotions, which means being able to identify the feelings you experience when they arise. Someone with high sensitivity to their true feelings can make decisions with confidence. In this sense, the attitude taken in making various life choices, such as selecting a school, choosing friends, a profession, or even a life partner, is influenced by emotional intelligence.

A student who chooses to attend university must understand themselves as someone who needs to develop and prepare for professional work. Another aspect of EQ is the sensitivity to beauty, which can be cultivated through experiences such as appreciating music, arranging gardens, organizing room décor, layout, color schemes, etc. Sensitivity is a crucial element in guiding a positive personality and enhancing life quality. Someone with high emotional sensitivity can make firm decisions and develop a resilient personality.

In practice, students must feel the beauty of gaining adequate knowledge and becoming an intelligent and professional person. However, the reality is that many students tend to value other things as more "beautiful" than becoming intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally intelligent. For instance, a student may feel embarrassed to carry many books in public because they fail to recognize the beauty of being someone who is knowledgeable and responsible in controlling knowledge.

Goleman (1995), through his famous book *Emotional Intelligence (EQ)*, provided a spectrum of intelligence, emphasizing that individuals can become proficient in their respective

fields and also become highly skilled in various other aspects. As stated by experts, the development of emotional intelligence is greatly influenced by stimuli such as music, as noted by Gordon Shaw (1996). This suggests that a student will have a higher quality of experience when a balance between hard skills and soft skills is achieved.

A similar view is echoed by authors of self-management books, such as Ariwibowo, who divide soft skills into two categories: intrapersonal skills and interpersonal skills. Intrapersonal skills refer to an individual's ability to manage themselves, which should be honed before engaging with the external world. Interpersonal skills, on the other hand, are essential for interacting with others.

Both categories can be further broken down as follows:

Intrapersonal skills	Interpersonal skills
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Transforming character 2. Transforming beliefs 3. Change management 4. Stress management 5. Time management 6. Creative thinking processes 7. Goal setting and life purpose 8. Accelerated learning techniques 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Communication skills 2. Relationship building 3. Motivation skills 4. Leadership skills 5. Self-marketing skills 6. Negotiation skills 7. Presentation skills 8. Public speaking skills

In conclusion, hard skills refer to the mastery of knowledge, technology, and technical skills related to one's field of study, while soft skills refer to an individual's ability to interact with others, including managing oneself. While all professions require specific hard skills, they also universally require soft skills. Both are essential for success in any career or life endeavor.

How to improve hard skills and soft skills for students?

According to Goleman (1995), there are 5 dimensions of emotional intelligence (EQ), which together encompass 25 competencies. Mastering at least six competencies spread across these five dimensions will enable an individual to become a highly skilled professional. Below is an explanation of each dimension and how it helps improve both hard and soft skills for students:

1. Self-Awareness

This dimension is about understanding one's own state, preferences, and intuition. It includes:

- Recognizing personal emotions
- Understanding personal strengths and weaknesses
- Having confidence in one's abilities

To improve this dimension, students should practice self-reflection and mindfulness and regularly assess their emotions and responses in various situations. This helps enhance both hard skills (through self-assessment of knowledge and abilities) and soft skills (by developing emotional awareness and self-confidence).

2. Self-Regulation

This dimension refers to managing one's internal state and resources effectively. Competencies include:

- Controlling emotions and negative impulses
- Maintaining honesty and integrity
- Taking responsibility for personal performance

- Being adaptable to change and open to new ideas

Students can enhance self-regulation by practicing time management, stress management, and learning techniques to overcome procrastination. This contributes to improved hard skills (through better focus on academic tasks) and soft skills (through emotional control and adaptability).

3. Motivation

Motivation is the drive that guides and supports goal achievement. It involves:

- The desire to improve oneself
- Alignment with group or organizational goals
- Readiness to seize opportunities
- Persistence in overcoming challenges

To improve motivation, students should set clear goals, break them down into smaller achievable steps, and maintain a positive mindset despite setbacks. Motivation will boost hard skills (by fostering a strong work ethic in mastering technical knowledge) and soft skills (by encouraging perseverance and resilience).

4. Empathy

Empathy is the awareness of others' feelings, concerns, and perspectives. This includes:

- Understanding others' emotions
- Developing others
- Providing excellent customer service
- Creating opportunities through social interactions
- Reading emotional cues and understanding group dynamics

Students can build empathy by engaging in active listening, participating in group activities, and volunteering in various social settings. Developing empathy enhances soft skills significantly by improving communication, collaboration, and social interactions.

5. Social Skills

Social skills involve the ability to influence others and manage relationships. It includes competencies such as:

- Persuasion and negotiation
- Active listening and clear messaging
- Conflict resolution
- Leadership enthusiasm
- Collaboration, cooperation, and team-building

Students can improve social skills by joining clubs, organizations, or teams that encourage collaboration and leadership. This helps improve soft skills (by enhancing communication, teamwork, and leadership capabilities) and indirectly supports hard skills through effective group work and project management.

Application in Practice

To develop both hard skills and soft skills effectively, students should actively engage in learning environments that challenge both their intellectual and emotional capacities. Examples include:

- 1) Participating in group discussions and debates to improve communication and leadership abilities.
- 2) Taking part in internships or hands-on projects to refine technical skills while also practicing teamwork and adaptability.

- 3) Joining extracurricular activities or organizations to enhance social skills and emotional intelligence.

In summary, Goleman's ideas (1995) mentioned that there are five dimensions of EQ that offer a comprehensive framework to help students develop both hard skills (technical expertise) and soft skills (emotional intelligence, communication, and leadership). Through consistent practice, self-awareness, and involvement in diverse activities, students can become well-rounded professionals who excel in both technical and interpersonal aspects of their careers.

The Importance of Hard Skills and Soft Skills for Students

As students and part of the academic community at a university, there are many potential conflicts and challenges that may arise. These conflicts, if not managed properly, can cause students to lose control, give up, and even lose sight of their goals. Some common examples of conflicts between students and lecturers, or between students themselves, include:

1. *Conflicts Between Students and Lecturers or Other Students*

- Example: Conflicts in thesis writing, where students want to finish quickly but lack experience and proper methodology. Sometimes they are difficult to give feedback to and feel their opinions are always right. This may also include plagiarism, a focus on speed rather than quality, and the lecturer being too busy to provide adequate guidance.

2. *Conflicts Related to Grades*

- Example: Students want the best grades but look for shortcuts, such as skipping classes, being late, or not doing assignments properly. There is also inconsistency in grading standards among lecturers, and sometimes no clear coordination or role models are available.

3. *A Non-Conducive Classroom Environment*

- Example: Large classes that make it difficult to concentrate, limited resources, scattered classroom locations, low attendance control, limited transport facilities, and other logistical challenges can reduce the motivation and concentration of students.

Facing these conflicts, students who are well-trained in soft skills or emotional intelligence (EQ) will be better equipped to resolve them constructively. Soft skills help students to approach problems in a positive manner, avoid unnecessary confrontation, and work together to find solutions.

Below is an explanation of the important soft skills that students can use to resolve these conflicts:

1. *Self-Awareness*

Students with strong self-awareness can recognize their emotions and the causes behind them. They can evaluate themselves and ask questions like, "What do I need to improve?" or "What should I learn more about?" With a strong sense of self-awareness, they can learn from their mistakes and continue to grow.

2. *Self-Regulation*

A student with good self-regulation is able to manage their emotions and impulses effectively. They will act cautiously, knowing when to hold back and when to take action. For example, instead of rushing to graduate, they will first ensure they are prepared for the challenges ahead. It's not about hiding emotions, but about choosing not to be controlled by them.

3. *Self-Motivation*

When things don't go as planned, a student with high emotional intelligence will not ask, "What's wrong with me?" Instead, they will ask, "What can I do to fix this problem?" They have the ability to motivate themselves and focus on the actions needed to achieve their goals, even when facing obstacles.

4. Empathy

Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. An empathetic student will try to see a situation from another person's perspective. For example, they will understand the busy schedule of a lecturer or the challenges faced by a fellow student. This skill helps to create better relationships and reduce the chances of conflicts because students act with wisdom and understanding.

5. Effective Relationships

With the four abilities mentioned above, students can build better relationships with others, including classmates, lecturers, and campus staff. They can communicate effectively, resolve problems together, and collaborate to achieve common goals. Students skilled in building effective relationships will find it easier to succeed both academically and socially.

The Importance of Soft Skills for Students

For students at universities, soft skills are crucial in creating individuals who are not only knowledgeable (hard skills) but also have strong social and emotional capabilities. With strong soft skills, students can better adapt to changes, collaborate with others, and solve problems constructively.

Soft skills help students to:

- Resolve conflicts in a mature and wise manner.
- Manage stress and pressure in academic activities.
- Maintain healthy relationships with peers, lecturers, and academic staff.
- Develop their potential to succeed both academically and in the workforce.

In simple terms, students who have high emotional intelligence tend to have a greater opportunity to succeed in developing their hard skills. Emotional intelligence supports students in overcoming challenges, managing themselves, communicating effectively, and collaborating in a healthy and harmonious environment. With a balance between hard skills and soft skills, students will be better prepared to face the professional world and achieve greater goals in their lives. This notion is supported by Schutte and Malouff (2011), who discuss the positive impact of emotional intelligence on academic performance, workplace success, and personal well-being.

Conclusion

Hard skills and soft skills are two essential components that shape a student into a capable, professional individual who excels in their field and can apply both skills effectively in the workplace. The balance between the quality and quantity of these two components is crucial for optimal performance. Without balance, a student will not achieve satisfactory results, especially in their academic and professional pursuits. Additionally, the attainment of high hard skills or intellectual abilities is influenced by the presence of soft skills in a student's personality. The application of hard skills in a professional setting will not be maximized without the supporting soft skills that drive success.

A student's success is not solely determined by intellectual abilities but also by the driving force of soft skills that steer them toward their goals and bring happiness and fulfillment. This

highlights the importance of both hard skills and soft skills for students: having high intellectual abilities and the capacity to navigate the challenges and situations that may cause students to lose sight of their objectives or give up.

Every student has a significant responsibility to acquire and enhance abilities that will be useful in their future careers, supported by the soft skills inherent in their character. The stronger a student's soft skills, the greater their drive and motivation to master knowledge. With strong soft skills, students will have greater opportunities for success in the workforce and will not just seek employment but also create job opportunities for others in society.

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