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JOANNA MARIA SZULC

<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9182-8425>
Gdańsk University of Technology
joanna.szulc@pg.edu.pl

MAGDALENA TOPOREK

<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6434-9867>
University of Gdańsk
magdalena.toporek@ug.edu.pl

MICHAŁ T. TOMCZAK

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2916-5015>
Gdańsk University of Technology
michal.tomczak@pg.edu.pl

MAŁGORZATA GAWRYCKA

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0933-4889>
Gdańsk University of Technology
mgaw@zie.pg.gda.pl

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Soft skills among academics: Five theoretically informed lessons for current times

Abstract

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The aim of this article is to provide a comprehensive examination of the role of soft skills among academics in the context of the evolving higher-education landscape.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: We use a scoping review of existing literature to discuss the importance of soft skills in academia. Through critical analysis and synthesis, we identify patterns and gaps in current knowledge and develop five theoretically informed lessons to improve practice and theory.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: A unique theoretical blending of five theories (resource-based, dynamic capabilities, cultural learning, implicit leadership, and human capital) forms the conceptual framework we used to arrive at our conclusions.

RESEARCH RESULTS: Our first conclusion emphasizes that soft skills are essential for a competitive advantage in the performative culture of neoliberal

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academics. Second, we emphasize that updating soft skills is crucial in order to respond to the changing higher-education environment. Third, going beyond the universal view of academia as a sharply hierarchical industry, we demonstrate how building relationships with stakeholders is necessary for academic skill development. Our fourth lesson explores the implications of different evaluators' perceptions of soft skills, highlighting the need for recognition of their value. The ultimate lesson highlights the need to invest in the skills of academics.

CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

We consolidate existing theoretical approaches and overcome theoretical fragmentation to arrive at a comprehensive and theoretically grounded set of lessons for those interested in developing and utilizing soft skills among academics in the unique context of the ever-changing higher-education environment. We challenge the norms of neoliberal academia and call for the development of realistic policies and procedures that promote a respectful, collaborative, and sustainable higher-education environment.

KEYWORDS:

soft skills, academia, scholars, neoliberal university

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to provide a comprehensive examination of the role of soft skills among academics in the context of the evolving higher-education landscape. In doing so, we draw on five theoretical perspectives to ultimately demonstrate the critical role of soft skills, their potential for growth and development, and the need for investment in these in the academic environment, which is complex and presents a variety of challenges and opportunities.

In recent years, significant changes have occurred that are being debated in academic circles and have a somewhat ambiguous impact on the academic community. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to universities transitioning to remote or hybrid learning models. The complex situation in higher education often requires academics to adapt to changing and uncertain circumstances and to learn how to navigate new ways of working. Given that soft skills are widely recognized as essential for achieving organizational development and for adapting to the rapidly changing environment (Kaute, 2021), the examination presented in this article of the role of soft skills among academics in the context of the evolving higher-education

landscape enabled us to make several contributions to the existing literature.

First, we demonstrated that perceptions of the ideal academic are fluid rather than absolute. The five theoretically informed lessons about academics' soft skills not only reveal this fluidity of conceptualizations of the ideal academic but also offer opportunities for discussing and renegotiating the image of the ideal academic to ultimately make academia more inclusive, leaving room for academics who are successful in various roles.

Second, in view of the conceptual, theoretical and methodological pluralism of the business-related literature on the concept of soft skills (Marin-Zapata et al., 2023), our conceptual discussion aims to provide new insights that can stimulate future research and theory building for studying soft skills, especially among academics. In doing so, we somewhat question the theoretical dispersion found in the field, and through a combination of five specific theoretical approaches relating to soft skills we facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the theoretical landscape in the soft skills field in the higher-education environment.

RESEARCH METHODS

To review the existing literature, we first engaged in a manual scan of journals in the field of soft skills and in the context of academia to identify some critical patterns and theories that could be of interest. Second, we conducted a comprehensive web-based search of relevant themes (e.g., academics, neoliberal universities, soft skills, ideal academics) using several electronic databases (e.g., Business Source Premier, Web of Science, Google Scholar). Third, we further scanned the references lists from the articles identified through the first two methods.

This strategy was aimed at a specific question: What can we learn about the role of soft skills in academics in the context of the evolving higher-education landscape? The subsequent analysis resulted in the development of five theoretically informed lessons about the role of soft skills in academia.

Soft skills – an overview

Soft skills are considered one of the people factors that are key to achieving organizational development and effectiveness (Gawrycka et al., 2021). However, our literature search led us to conclude that one of the key challenges in the existing research on soft skills is the conceptual confusion that arises with regard to terms such as “skills”, “expertise”, “acumen”, and “competency” (Marin-Zapata et al., 2023). These are indeed interrelated and often used interchangeably in the literature, yet they do not necessarily mean the same thing. In this paper, we use the definition of a skill that sees it as the ability to perform a certain physical or mental task (Spencer & Spencer, 1993) that is functionally related to attaining a performance goal (Marin-Zapata et al., 2023).

As explained by Marin-Zapata et al. (2023) in their recent systematic analysis of research concerning soft skills, some scholars define them as pervasive or generic skills, some perceive them as primarily cognitive in nature and related to personality traits, while others describe them as nontechnical skills that involve interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities to facilitate mastered performance in particular social contexts. For the purpose of this paper, we employ the latter definition, which resonates most with our beliefs.

Soft skills and the higher-education environment

While the importance of developing students’ soft skills is strongly emphasized, both in the academic environment (Gawrycka et al., 2020; Tomczak et al., 2023) and by employees (Stankiewicz et al., 2020), not enough attention is given to the soft skills of the very academics who are responsible for imparting them. Therefore, it is important for universities to also invest in the development and evaluation of soft skills among their academics as this could have a significant impact on their performance and overall success.

However, this task may be particularly complex given the constantly changing and evolving nature of the higher-education environment (Szulc, 2021). Indeed, academia is well known for its competitive culture and strong performance orientation. The dominating narrative sees competition rather than collaboration as the key to

individual success (Jamjoom, 2021) and we observe a culture of long hours and practically unlimited availability (Fletcher et al., 2007). This environment is further characterized by a largely individualistic system of rewards and recognition, which indirectly leads to academia often being portrayed as an isolated place where everyone takes care of themselves and tries to fulfil the ever-increasing research productivity demands (Nielsen, 2017).

In such a competitive and fast-paced environment, a set of well-developed soft skills appears particularly important for academics. This is because their success often depends not only on their prowess but also on their ability to work collaboratively, communicate effectively, and adapt to changing (and challenging) circumstances.

Theoretical landscape

The most recent attempt to understand the theoretical landscape in the soft skills field was made by Marin-Zapata et al. (2023), who conducted a thorough systematic literature review ultimately aimed at shedding light on the meaning of soft skills. These authors described the field as theoretically dispersed. In essence, there are diverse theoretical frameworks that coexist and compete for attention or dominance. Yet, and somewhat paradoxically, the frequency of use of theoretical frameworks to guide studies relating to soft skills was found to be low. Understanding theoretical dispersion is, however, crucial for scholars and practitioners alike as it highlights the need for critical reflection and dialogue. Therefore, we aim to integrate and synthesize diverse theoretical perspectives relating to the study of soft skills to enhance our understanding of their complexity in the academic context and to eventually arrive at what we label as the five lessons about soft skills in academia.

The said lessons are based on the five major theoretical approaches that have been previously used in the study of soft skills and beyond; however – at least to the best of our knowledge – they have never been combined together in one study. We believe that each of the selected theories has the potential to collectively contribute to a more generic understanding of soft skills in academia. Our first lesson is based on resource-based theory (Barney, 1995), which treats soft skills as

resources that have a significant impact on one's performance. Whilst the resource-based view helps us understand the contributions of soft skills to performance outcomes, it is a dynamic capabilities theory (Teece & Pisano, 1994) that goes beyond such simple assumptions and further emphasizes the importance of organizational agility in sensing and shaping both opportunities and threats and maintaining competitiveness by proactive adaptation of our soft skills, which is the focus of our second lesson. Our conceptual discussion then turns to cultural learning theory (Tomasello et al., 1993), which is the basis of the third lesson. Overall, learning theories are said to be particularly useful when one attempts to understand the antecedents and consequences of one's soft skills and the interaction between individual factors and context as part of the learning process (Marin-Zapata et al., 2023). The fourth lesson is based on implicit leadership theory (Judge et al., 2002). Whilst traditional leadership theories focus on the traits of leaders and how such traits (in this case, soft skills) can impact work settings and performance outcomes, we demonstrate that soft skills and the resultant behaviours may be viewed and valued differently depending on who the raters are. We further discuss the implications of these variations for academics. Finally, to develop the fifth lesson, we build on the notion of human capital theory (Hitt et al., 2001), which we consider useful to understand how organizational investment in people's soft skills may positively influence organizational-level outcomes. We now turn to discuss each of these theoretically informed lessons in more depth.

Lesson 1: Academics' resources in the form of their soft skills are essential to achieve a competitive advantage

Resource-based theory (RBT) is a widely recognized approach within the realm of strategic management and is frequently employed as a managerial framework to identify the crucial resources necessary for a firm to attain a competitive and sustainable advantage. RBT explores the association between top management's tangible competencies, talent attitude competencies and company performance. It postulates that resources, such as knowledge, capabilities, and processes, which possess qualities like value, rarity, inimitability,

and non-substitutability, could generate and sustain competitive advantages that are challenging for rivals to replicate (Barney, 1995). Consequently, it can be argued that managerial competencies, if effectively managed, can serve as a source of competitive advantage for an organization. Furthermore, managers' soft skills, which can significantly impact employee satisfaction and productivity, are also critical to achieving such an advantage. Managers who possess strong soft skills are better able to inspire and motivate their teams, resolve conflicts, and communicate effectively with employees and other stakeholders (Vasanthakumari, 2019), resulting in superior organizational performance and a competitive edge for the company.

The present study endeavors to extend the application of the resource view beyond firms to encompass academia, thereby expanding its scope. We believe that both the recognition and development of academics' soft skills are vital in achieving a competitive advantage in the academic environment.

First, the cultivation of soft skills among academics, including communication, compassion, problem-solving, inclusivity, adaptability, as well as social and emotional intelligence can offer various advantages to an academic institution (e.g., Gawrycka et al., 2020). With well-developed soft skills, academics have the ability to create an engaging and favorable learning environment for students that may foster lifelong learning habits and enhance their enjoyment and passion for learning (Toporek, 2022). This positive learning environment can also potentially lead to improved academic performance, higher engagement, and better retention rates among students.

Likewise, universities that employ researchers with a unique skill set that includes communication, collaboration and stakeholder engagement competencies can significantly contribute to improving their research productivity, which can result in higher-quality outputs (Małecka, 2018). Additionally, the ability to engage with stakeholders and form stronger institutional partnerships helps academics to acquire relevant knowledge (Sasse & Haddon, 2019) and can lead to more impactful research and greater dissemination of findings.

Furthermore, having strong soft skills can also enhance a researcher's ability to attract talented individuals to join their research team (Reymert et al., 2022) and subsequently attract potential funding opportunities (Edgerton, 2009).

Lesson 2: Academics' soft skills need to be updated to reflect the changing nature of the environment

Since its introduction by Teece and Pisano (1994), the theory of dynamic capabilities has attracted significant attention from scholars of international business. The dynamic capabilities approach suggests that firms should use their core competencies to adapt to short-term competitive situations, with a view to building a long-term competitive advantage. Given that maintaining a competitive advantage is an ongoing process, scholars have emphasized the importance of adaptable resources and strategic alignment. To achieve these goals, organizations and their employees must be capable of learning quickly and cultivating new elements, such as advanced technologies and the insightful perspectives derived from customer feedback (Teece et al., 1997). Teece's concept of dynamic capabilities emphasizes the importance of a firm's agility in sensing and shaping opportunities and threats, exploiting opportunities, and maintaining competitiveness by strengthening, combining, protecting, and reconfiguring their intangible and tangible assets as necessary.

Consequently, the proactive approach that is required to confront the challenges of a dynamic environment can also apply to universities and academics in their pursuit of market competitiveness and relevance. To apply dynamic capabilities theory to academics, it is crucial to recognize the need for continuous development of their skills and knowledge, including knowledge management (Małecka, 2022), to adapt to changing educational landscapes and to meet the evolving needs of students. This entails acknowledging that the teaching profession has recently undergone a significant transformation, moving from a traditional teacher-centered approach to a more learner-centered one which aims to develop students' autonomous behavior (Holec, 1981). Reeve (2016) argues that adopting an autonomous approach to teaching leads to high need fulfillment and low need frustration among students, resulting in positive outcomes such as increased motivation, greater perceived competence, enhanced creativity, improved engagement and well-being, heightened desire to tackle challenges, greater persistence and, ultimately, better academic performance (Reeve et al., 2019). To achieve these, academics must prioritize developing students' awareness and independence over



being authoritative instructors and experts. Academic teachers' contemporary expectations entail proficiency in pedagogy, interaction, and didactics (Komorowska, 2015), as well as fostering a wide range of competencies, encouraging autonomous attitudes and behaviors, providing training in strategies, and considering students' individual differences, all while utilizing modern technologies (Pawlak, 2022).

Academic teachers can also leverage the principles of dynamic capabilities theory by adopting a continuous learning and development mindset to stay competitive and relevant in the constantly evolving educational landscape. Universities can support this effort by providing professional development opportunities that enhance academics' skill sets, which encompass soft skills such as effective communication, teamwork, empathy, adaptability, and leadership, as well as a diverse range of competencies, including critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, communication, digital literacy.

Today, due to the digital transformation of organizations (Jedynak et al., 2021), higher-education institutions are also undergoing radical transformations driven by the need to digitize education and training processes in record time and in cooperation with academics who lack innate capabilities for online teaching. Nowadays, one of the main challenges in teaching requires lecturers to interact with their students in a way that fosters their self-development and the skills they need to handle and adapt to situations in the diverse and dynamically changing world order (Mroczek-Dąbrowska & Kania, 2020).

To ensure that academic teachers are effectively engaging and supporting their students, ongoing self-reflection and evaluation of their teaching methodologies are necessary. Through this process, teachers can identify areas for improvement and make necessary modifications to enhance the quality of education they provide, thus positively contributing to students (Frick & Kapp, 2006).

Lesson 3: Building close relationships with stakeholders is essential for academic skill development

Cultural learning theory posits that cultural learning is a uniquely human form of social learning that allows for high-fidelity transmission of behaviors and information among individuals, thus providing



the psychological basis for cultural evolution (Tomasello et al., 1993). The human ontogeny of cultural learning manifests in three forms: imitative learning, instructed learning, and collaborative learning. Intersubjectivity and perspective-taking play a vital role in the original learning process and the resulting cognitive product. This theory has been applied to studying how a sojourner may learn or acquire relevant social knowledge and skills of another culture by means of contact with locals (Van Bakel et al., 2014), thereby establishing a social network beyond the expatriate bubble.

By drawing on this theory, we contend that close relations with stakeholders is a vital aspect of academic development as it enables scholars to acquire the requisite competencies for effective performance in their respective domains. It can be facilitated through interactions with a diverse array of individuals, including students, practitioners, researchers, government officials, and other community members. Such interactions can offer valuable insights and feedback to academics, aiding in the refinement of their work and enhancing their effectiveness in teaching and research abilities, ultimately leading to significant contributions in their areas of expertise. Academics seeking to advance their research should broaden their perspective beyond the university by engaging with stakeholders to gain a deeper understanding of actual issues, acquire relevant knowledge and research materials, and develop their interpersonal skills (Sasse & Haddon, 2019).

Furthermore, it should be noted that collaborations between academics and practitioners have proven to be effective in a wide range of disciplines, offering benefits for both practice and research. These partnerships have been found to enhance objectivity and validity, improve policies and procedures, and cultivate positive community relations (Hansen et al., 2014). Collaborating in this way promotes a more holistic approach to research and practice and creates a unified vision for the future (Dror & Morgan, 2020).

Finally, for academics who prioritize their teaching career, it is important to develop awareness and understanding of their own cultural beliefs and biases, as well as those of their students. Cultural awareness promotes effective communication, unity and successful globalization, at the same time avoiding misunderstanding and confusion. By engaging closely with stakeholders, academics

can gain valuable insight into the needs and perspectives of diverse student groups. This involves recognizing the cultural backgrounds and experiences of students and how these factors may affect their learning. It is necessary to create an inclusive and welcoming learning environment (Markey et al., 2021) that acknowledges and respects cultural differences among students. Additionally, academics can collaborate with other teaching professionals to gain insight into innovative teaching methods and best practices.

Lesson 4: Others may have different expectations about academics' skills, but prioritizing their own beliefs and staying true to their own expertise is crucial for maintaining wellbeing

Implicit leadership is a theory that originates from the field of management; it simply assumes that different people may have different views of a manager's behavior (Judge et al., 2002). In short, this approach suggests that the perceptions of leaders or managers are shaped by a complex interplay of personal experiences, cultural values and social norms. These may sometimes be based on implicit biases or stereotypes that people may not be even aware of or are unwilling to acknowledge.

Whilst most research that builds on the implicit leadership approach focuses on the impact on employee outcomes of a more inclusive and equitable leadership culture, we are more interested in people's perceptions of leadership and the impact of such perceptions on leaders themselves (rather than their followers). More specifically, we present academics as leaders in our discussion. They are leaders because of their positions, such as being heads of departments or faculties; they develop their leadership in learning and teaching, or they are successful leaders in research. No matter what route they choose – or are made to choose, and more than often they have to choose all these at once – academics are leaders: they are the experts, innovators, teachers, and influencers who are able to shape the direction and progress of their disciplines in important ways.

In line with the basic assumptions of the implicit leadership approach, group members will have implicit expectations and

assumptions about the soft skills that are inherent in a leader. In higher-education settings, academics will be constantly assessed and evaluated by multiple stakeholders, each with their own perspectives and criteria for evaluating their skills, etc. (e.g., Steinerowska-Streb & Głód, 2020). Deans, department heads, students, research bodies, academic societies, professional associations, industry organizations, funding agencies, but also media outlets and society in general – all these parties will develop their own image of the specific set of soft skills that every ‘ideal academic’ should possess. If we juxtapose such images, a picture reflecting Faulkner’s (2007) conceptualization of the ideal academic emerges, one that is “multifaceted and multidimensional”. Indeed, images of ideal academics are fluid and context-dependent. Bleijenbergh et al. (2012) rightly explain that while ideals and norms can diametrically change, the image of the ideal academic will evolve in both time and space. Such externally designed and moderated sets of often conflicting expectations can lead to academics experiencing feelings of failure if they do not ‘measure up’. This, in turn, will often cause significant stress, with damaging consequences for their own well-being.

The implicit leadership approach suggests that to address these issues, academic institutions need to be aware of the implicit biases and assumptions that may be shaping their culture and the way in which academics are perceived at different levels. In order to mitigate such biases, investment in training, education, and other interventions may be necessary. By creating a more inclusive and equitable organizational culture, employee outcomes can be improved and academics will have the basis to achieve greater success in their own specific goals. What we believe to be essential in a context where academics are faced with a wide range of expectations and demands placed upon their skills by various stakeholders is for academics to prioritize what they believe is essential and important in their work, rather than trying to meet the expectations of everyone around them. Attempting to satisfy all expectations can have a negative impact on their mental well-being and lead to burnout or exhaustion (Manky & Saravia, 2021). By focusing on what they believe is most important, academics can better preserve their physical, mental, and emotional health, thereby maintaining their passion and motivation for their work (Scholz & Szulc, 2023).

Lesson 5: Investment in academics' skills must be prioritized to ensure the advancement of academic institutions and to keep up with the ever-evolving landscape of academia

Human Capital has become a focal point of interest in various sectors, including nations, politics, education, and organizations, as it is recognized as a highly valuable resource. Human Capital Theory suggests that investment in human capital is critical to a firm's success, as both individuals and organizations benefit from it (Hitt et al., 2001).

Ployhart and Moliterno (2011) have highlighted the importance of education, experience, skills, and knowledge in the relationship between an individual's human capital and organizational performance. In particular, these authors suggested that an individual's level of education, experience, and skill set can significantly impact their ability to contribute to an organization, leading to increased productivity, profitability, and a competitive advantage.

Human capital has been proposed as a missing element in dynamic capability theory (Teece & Pisano, 1994) since it encompasses an individual's knowledge, skills, and experience. Furthermore, human capital is gaining increasing significance in the ever-changing work environment. It is in such a context that investment in soft skills and valuing these gains is of special importance. In light of this, we call on universities to stop focusing only on skills that can be measured by metrics or represented as key performance indicators that are then used to reward and monitor our working lives. We advocate for an end to the perception of academics as perfect and self-sufficient individuals. It is time for universities to recenter the neoliberal principles of the ideal academic worker and to effectively attend to equity concerns.

When aligned with human capital theory, this can be done partly through investing in academics' skills, which are a form of capital that significantly contributes to institutional long-term success and sustainability. Currently, most research attention is being devoted to developing students' skills (e.g., Bigos & Michalik, 2021); however, the assumptions behind human capital theory lead us to believe that while it is undoubtedly essential to invest in developing students' skills, it is equally crucial to devote more attention to academics'

professional development. Despite their extensive knowledge and experience, academics need to continue to enhance their skills in the constantly evolving academic landscape, which requires them to adapt to new teaching methods, technologies, and research techniques, and to stay relevant and effective in their disciplines (Åkerlind, 2005). Additionally, the demands of leadership roles in academia have increased significantly, making it necessary for academics to develop skills in communication, conflict resolution, and teamwork. Providing opportunities for academics to participate in professional development programs, conferences, and workshops can help them develop new skills and enhance their existing ones.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We have undertaken a comprehensive examination of the role of soft skills among academics within the evolving higher-education landscape, and we have highlighted the critical importance of these skills, their potential for growth and development, and the necessity for investment in them. We firmly believe that the possession of soft skills is essential not only for individual career success but also for meeting the demands of the ever-changing labor market.

Moving forward, it would be valuable to expand this discussion by delving into specific assumptions about potential implementations of soft skills development programs within academic institutions. By doing so, we can create a roadmap that elucidates the practical steps needed to foster the growth and enhancement of these skills among academics. It is essential to recognize that a collective effort is required to cultivate a community of fulfilled academics wherein the emphasis on soft skills is ingrained into the fabric of academia.

With this in mind, we recommend that academic institutions develop comprehensive training programs and workshops that specifically target the enhancement of soft skills. These initiatives should be integrated into the academic curriculum, offering students and faculties alike ample opportunities to cultivate and refine skills such as communication, empathy, adaptability, and problem-solving.

Creating a culture that values soft skills is also essential. Encouraging open discussions, seminars, and forums on the subject can

raise awareness of the significance of these skills. Faculty members should actively exemplify the integration of soft skills into their daily interactions and research pursuits.

In terms of further research directions, we propose investigations into the most effective methods for assessing and measuring soft skills development in academia. This would help establish objective benchmarks for evaluating the impact of soft skills training programs and identify areas that may require further improvement.

Overall, we hope that this article sparks thoughtful reflection on how academics interpret and assess the importance of soft skills. By nurturing these skills and advocating for their integration into the academic journey, we will take the first step toward cultivating academia as a collective, joyful, and fulfilling space that benefits both individuals and the academic community as a whole.

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