

# **Developing Soft Skills, the Intangible Qualities Empowering Competitiveness and Success in the Labor Market, Case Study, Elbasan, Albania**

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*Abstract:* - This paper aims at providing a general view of the world of entrepreneurship in Elbasan helping to understand the direction and skills workers should be trained for. Employees of a business characterized by a satisfactory level of vocational training and competencies, including soft skills help a lot in promoting and encouraging successful business competitiveness in the sector where it operates. However, creating such a competitive team is a real challenge nowadays in the context of many confrontations with problems of the external environment but also as a result of many other factors related to the employees' education, training, individual skills, etc. This research, focused on Elbasan, intends to present an extensive analysis of the data collected through a detailed and well-elaborated questionnaire for a sampling of 39 selected businesses in 5 main sectors. These businesses' data were collected about their employees, their soft skills' mastering, their professional training, internships, and future needs for professions in cases where businesses have anticipated their growth. Finally, the study presents its main findings highlighting the professional competencies currently required by the labor market, current workplaces, and the selected businesses. Furthermore, the paper provides recommendations for businesses, employees also the institutions involved in this process, whose applicability would create further improvements in business services, employability, and improvement of workers' skills within the framework of soft ones.

*Key-words:* - employability; soft skills; competencies; success competitiveness.

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## **1 Introduction**

The distinct gap that exists between school and the labor market can be reduced by increasing employees' professional skills, and their developing life skills which are currently known as "soft skills". Over the last few years, Vocational Education and Training in Albania (VET) has been strongly supported by the government and some other foreign donors to build a cooperative efficient system

between the basic knowledge obtained through the educational system and the one considered necessary in practice. Current educational systems are time conditioned lacking what is known as "global cohesion", [1], i.e not being able to match the requests of the labor market. Therefore, the main question that arises is: How can actors, such as entrepreneurs or even education itself contribute to reducing or eliminating this gap? Providing an

answer to the above question would have an immediate effect not only on youth's employment but even on the progress of companies and businesses which constitute the engine of a country's economic growth. On the other hand, studies conducted over the last years have displayed the increasing need for employees whose soft skills are well developed and follow the requirements of society. Entrepreneurs do more and more observe an increasing deficiency of personal skills in their employees, rather than professional ones. Consequently, in the framework of these competencies and the required professional skills, there was a consolidated idea in preparing and applying for this project proposal, which is focused on Elbasan<sup>1</sup>This project aims at presenting a broad analysis with the data collected through a pre-selected business sample in Elbasan, which through an appropriate questionnaire identified and diagnosed the required professional skills as well as the soft ones, highly estimated by today's labor market and entrepreneurs too. The research includes 39 businesses, covering five main sectors in Elbasan, which are being required to gather data about their employees, their professional skills, their workshops, practices, etc. In the end, the research presents its main findings and provides recommendations for the businesses as well as other institutions involved in this process. Their applicability would undoubtedly bring further improvements not only for the businesses themselves but even for the workforce.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 The Importance of Soft Skills

One of the most urgent issues researchers argue about in the field of vocational education nowadays is that of guaranteeing that the current education provided to young people does enable them to meet the main purpose of the country's economic progress, and youth's adaptation to the labor market.

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<sup>1</sup> Elbasan is the third biggest town in Albania. There are many preschools, 9<sup>th</sup> grade, and secondary school educational institutions in Elbasan, as well as the University of Elbasan "Aleksandër Xhuvani". Elbasan is also an important industrial center.

But how does education enable young people to be successful in their personal and professional life? How are young people prepared for the future taking into account that a considerable percentage of them will probably work in professions which are not yet present in the current labor market? As Feargal Quinn, [2], expresses in his paper "Acquiring the 'Right' skills" investment in young people through education should include cognitive and non-cognitive skills, it is to be broadly agreed and accepted that it is going to be the method that will teach youth how to learn quickly and how to quickly adapt in a changing dynamic environment. This way of thinking highly emphasizes that the basis for successful vocational training lies in the implementation of various practices offered by the educational systems themselves of different countries. Concerning what is mentioned above, in her publication, Sophie M. Sparrow, [3], says that what is observed in students by professors in the classroom, such as lack of attention or irresponsibility in the accomplishment of the given assignments, lack of interest and participation in new projects, etc. it is actually what is transmitted by these students in the future, highly reflected even in the relationships with their employers; otherwise said lack of the above soft skills considerably influences and determines the employee-employer relationship in the labor market. It is to be highlighted that the labor market is often a cruel teacher/educator for young people. If their initial work experiences are unpleasant, likely, their future perspectives will not meet their labor expectations, [4].

### 2.2 Nature of Soft Skills and Their Assessment

Although there may be different opinions as to whether these characteristics (soft skills) are inherited or acquired through the years, empirical evidence<sup>2</sup> found in the study of law students support the idea that it is not a waste of time or effort on the

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<sup>2</sup> Kehner, supra note 3, at 60 ("Empirical evidence supports the view that professionalism education in law school is not a waste of time and effort; a person's character is molded and changed beyond the teenage formative years, based on one's experience and reflection.")

side of the professors to encourage young people's rehabilitation towards these skills, since a person's character is molded and altered even beyond the teenage years, based on someone's reflection and experience. Based on the consulted literature, despite the opinion expressed by Peggy Klaus that soft skills are often the least estimated ones, [5], it is to be highlighted that they (soft skills) are essential in many disciplines, such as analytical disciplines, research sciences, operations management, [6], information systems, financing, project management, leadership, [7]. Many researchers have been trying to quantify the importance of soft skills and technical skills. Reports have shown that when asked about the importance of various skills, information technology managers in the role of employers, did estimate soft skills as being superior to technical ones which might sound surprising to every reader taking into account the level of technicality required by an individual working in the field of information technology. Beyond what can be displayed in the CV of a job searcher, cooperation, leadership, and teamwork skills, as well as many others evidenced by the author Nitin Bhatnagar in his book "Effective Communication and Soft Skills-Strategies for Success", [8], along with the communication skills and those of using a foreign language, particularly in the service industry, considerably enhances employment possibility of an individual who possesses these capacities, pieces of evidence which are also highlighted by Vishwanath, [9], as useful conclusions of their studies. Employers' role in the assessment of their employees' soft skills is essential too. Work reports or analyses for instance are highly used by the employers' communities as a good way of setting employment criteria, training curricula or employees' performance assessing criteria, etc. In general, these analyses tend to consider a job as fixed in its nature (consequently even in its skills' requirements), thus treating the individual or the job candidate as a skill-characterized profile that more or less fits a specific job. Work analyses also tend to prioritize the routine or unchangeable aspect of a job. Consequently, through these realized analyses, within a determined context, it is possible to achieve a closer common approximation of employers' requirements regarding soft skills. Some scientific researchers have also conducted experiments with cognitive skills to understand analytic thinking and "problem-solving", [10], as two other important soft

skill elements broadly treated even by the author Soumit Sain in his book "Customer Knowledge Management", [11]. These researchers have also included the development of a standard set of questions that intend to discover different types of knowledge or manners that can assist in learning how to perform a task in a certain workplace [9].

## 2.3 Context

At the center of an innovative and competitive economy, investments in human capital and the quality of the educational system are crucial, consequently providing more workplaces for the people. Enhancing young people's employability means ensuring that they are taking the appropriate skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will enable them to find a job and cope with the unpredictable changes in the labor market during their entire professional experience and career. Vocational training and education aim to provide knowledge and practical skills which enable an individual to perform activities in terms of a profession or a range of professions; consequently, vocational training plays an essential role in the economic development of every country. According to INSTAT<sup>3</sup>, the labor market data suggest that the economic growth in Albania has translated into considerable improvements in the labor market. Job creation recovered after a significant decline in 2013, which encouraged economic growth and employability increase to move in a parallel way. Although the employment rate in Albania for people aged 15-64 increased by 50% by the end of 2013, and 59.5% by the end of 2018 marking in this way one of the highest ratios among the countries of the Western Balkans, it remains below the average of the European Union countries. However, it is to be stressed that the rate of employment has improved significantly, especially among women (from 40% in 2013 to 52.4% in 2018). In the framework of the increase of employment in our country, as it is already mentioned above, in addition to vocational competencies and skills, it is necessary to encourage the development of language skills as part of soft skills, which significantly serve in recognizing social, cultural and economic differences of other countries too. Young people's engagement in different courses, or choosing vocational education

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<sup>3</sup>, Institute of Statistics

are other alternatives that might considerably affect the increase of employability for young people, as one of the most active forces of society. Education can never remain static, it is necessary to be frequently challenged, particularly in vocational training and the development of soft skills. In all this situation created in vocational training and education in Albania, it is necessary to undertake concrete actions that increase the importance of vocational education, vocational courses, or institutions that support the improvement of vocational competencies and soft skills required nowadays by the labor market.



Fig. 1: Geographical location of Elbasan, Albania

Concerning this, it is necessary changing the approaches to the realization methods of vocational practices, by taking the necessary information/knowledge and matching it with the personal traits which together contribute to creating the appropriate soft skill of an individual enabling him/her to be able to compete in the labor market. Only in this way can job searchers always reflect and do their best about their soft skills and vocational capacities too.

### 3 Methodology

The materials and methods used in the realization of this paper fit the questions raised through the observations and a well-structured questionnaire. All these questions aimed at highlighting the topic treated in this study. The methodology process went through some steps before coming to the final phase

of data generation and interpretation. The three main phases used in the realization of this research are:

#### 3.1 Preparatory Phase

During this phase, there were designed and concretized the appropriate activities which would support the observations and necessary capacities for the realization of the objectives. Taking into account that the main observation unit was the businesses, one of the main and strongest points was that of determining the institutions from which cooperation was needed to forward the data for drawing up an inclusive list of all the businesses operating in Elbasan. The list of all the operating subjects (businesses) in Elbasan constitutes the basic document being used as the *Population* of this research. The document contained data from 6651 businesses. After reviewing the data, the list was processed reaching a total of 6502 businesses (149 businesses less) which do represent the total population for the realization of this research study. This database of businesses was processed according to three specific criteria: business classification; business industry and business category.

Referring to this classification, approximately 74% of the businesses are small, and 25% of the businesses are considered to be big ones. This means that our sample highly depends on the classification of the small businesses, in which 52% belong to the trade industry and nearly 35% belong to the service industry.

#### 3.2 Observation Phase

During this phase, an expert conducted a partial testing of the questionnaire in case of improving its content, and also to comprehend how the designed template of the questionnaire would be understood by the businesses. Following this testing, there were concluded non-essential changes. After the final reviewing process, the Final questionnaire template was delivered to the work group engaged in its completion.

#### 3.3 Final Phase

This phase consists of processing the data gathered from the questionnaires, creating a database as well as analyzing the data generated to reach conclusions and recommendations. The outcome of this phase is developed and elaborated in the following section “Main Findings and Analyses”.

## 4 Results and Discussions

After the successful accomplishment of the above-mentioned methodology phases, including questionnaires and observations, the collected data were processed and served to generate evidenced results which were later used and analyzed to draw useful results and recommendations.

### 4.1 General Data Evidenced in the Sample Businesses

From the observations made and the data processed, the sampled businesses appear as stable ones, if we consider their experience in the market for more than ten years, as already demonstrated in the table below. For interviewing purposes, these businesses demonstrate a satisfactory level of reliability, towards the choice of alternatives that best fits them in the questionnaire, because they are not new businesses in the market and they do already have a concretized range of activities, capacities of human resources such as well as *skills* they want their employees to have to meet the required productivity and performance during the working process.

Table 1. Years of operating sampled businesses in the market

Starting year of activity	1990-2000	2001-2005	2006-2010	2011-2015	2016-2020
Number of businesses	7 Busines sses	2 Busine sses	12 Busines ses	11 Busines ses	7 Busines ses
Operating years in the market	20-30	15-19	10-14	5-9	0-4

### 4.2 Characteristics of the Realized Activity and the Required Professions

One of the main purposes of the questionnaire was also the provision information on the current professions that are carried out in the selected industry/category businesses (which constitute the majority of the business activities operating in Elbasan), as well as business planning for expansion over a mid-term planning period 3 to 5 years. When professions/jobs as a result of the latest one.

a business expands, the human resources required to cope with the increased flux would logically increase, but the interest in this questionnaire is whether business expansion would be accompanied by a change in the current occupations or whether businesses would increase the range of activities/services or even processes currently offered. More than 50% of the operating businesses pretend their activity is expanding, but only 1/3 of them would need extra professions different from the ones currently offered.

Differently said, only 26% of the businesses are planning to include different profiles in their operating activity, meanwhile 74% of them will continue to offer the same products or services. The following table provides groups of similar business categories (which do currently share the same operating activities) accompanied by the appropriate information about the required professions, business expansion planning as well as the extra required

Table 2. The jobs required by businesses for their functioning and the extra required professions in case of expansion

Industry	Business Category	Professions currently required	Expansion and the extra professions	Extra professions
Building/construction	Building/construction	Building engineer, Workers, Economist, Driver	X	X
Production/Service	Textile/Tailoring	Tailor, Salesman, Economist	X	X
Production	Furniture	Administrator, Production manager/supervisor, worker, Architect, Engineer, Economist, storekeeper	↑	X
Free profession	Accounting expert/ Lawyer	Practiced professions	X	X
Service	Bar-Cafe	Waiter, bartender, bartender assistant, cleaner, Economist, Manager, security guard	↑	+ Staff manager, kids' animator, gardener
Service	Restaurant	Waiter, bartender, bartender assistant, cook, cook assistant, cleaner, dishwasher, Economist	X	X
Service	Barber / Hairdresser	Hairdresser, barber, beautician, Economist	X	X
Service	Hotel service	Receptionist, laundry worker, assistant staff, manager, Economist	↑	X
Service	Service	Electronic engineer, Mechanic, auto electrician, economist	↑	X
Service	Events agency	designer, driver, assistant staff	↑	X
Trading/marketing	Marketing food products/ Delivery/ Supermarket/ Meat trading	Economist, Manager, Operator, cashier, seller, hall worker, driver/engine mechanic, storekeeper, butcher	↑	+ IT worker, security worker
Trading	Flower marketing	Flower seller, decorator, Economist	↑	
Trading	Production, trading maize flour	Worker, sales manager, manager, Economist	↑	+ Sales manager
Trading	Trading of industrial products/building materials	Seller, repair service, Economist, worker	↑	X
Trading/marketing	Trade confections	Seller, worker	X	X
Trading	Gas trading	Gas seller, sales manager, Gas skilled workers, Economist	↑	+ Drivers for the distribution of gas
Trading	Import-Export	Economist, online seller, salesperson, Specialist following the business activity (electro-mechanic, Mechanic),	↑	X

		a worker for organizing products, loading-unloading, drivers, cleaners		
Trading	Pharmaceutical products	Pharmaceutical products, Economist	↑	X
Trading	Chancellery	seller, Economist	X	X
Trading	Trading households	Import manager, Economist, engineer, welder, marketing manager, seller, driver, cleaner	↑	+ Products services, air conditioning technician, furnace worker
Trading	Trading/coffee	Sales manager, Economist, assistant, a technician for the machines	↑	+ Mechanic engineer, administrator of online selling, Graphic Designer
Trading	Trading of electronic equipment	Sales manager, Economist	↑	X

### 4.3 The Importance of Competencies and Skills According to Businesses

To view the approach of businesses towards the necessary competencies and skills that employees should have, there were listed twelve skills evaluated in four scales: *Very important*, *Important*, *Little important*, and *Nonapplicable*. The listed competencies generally demonstrate common skills that can serve any industry/category business.

They do not represent specific skills for specific businesses. The following table (Table 3) represents the voting of businesses regarding these skills. It also illustrates the level of importance per each skill depending on the number of votes per each of them. 66% of the skills have been assessed as *Very important*, 33% of the skills have been assessed as *Important* and only 1% of the skills have been assessed as *Little important*.

Table 3. Assessment scales per each of the presented skills

Competences/ Skills	Very important	Important	Little important	Nonapplicable
Technical skills associated with the nature of business	16 ★	14	9	0
Communicative skills	33 ★	6	0	0
Group work skills	24 ★	12	3	0
IT Skills	8	10 ★	5	3
Managing and leadership skills	9	17 ★	9	4
Organization skills	18 ★	17	4	0
Skills in working under workload conditions and extended hours	22 ★	15	0	2
Driving skills	14 ★	8	9	8
Skills in adapting fast	19 ★	19 ★	1	0
Skills in learning fast	18	20 ★	1	0
Integrity maintenance skills	18 ★	15	6	0
Foreign languages skills	5	9 ★	19 ★	6

In the following Figure 1, it is emphasized that the majority of the businesses, approximately 85% of them, regardless of their classification, do estimate employees' communication skills as the most important ones. The second most important skills are considered cooperation skills and skills in

working under workload conditions and extended hours.

IT skills turn out to be the least required skill among businesses in Elbasan an expected result given that businesses have not mentioned any IT employees or experts.

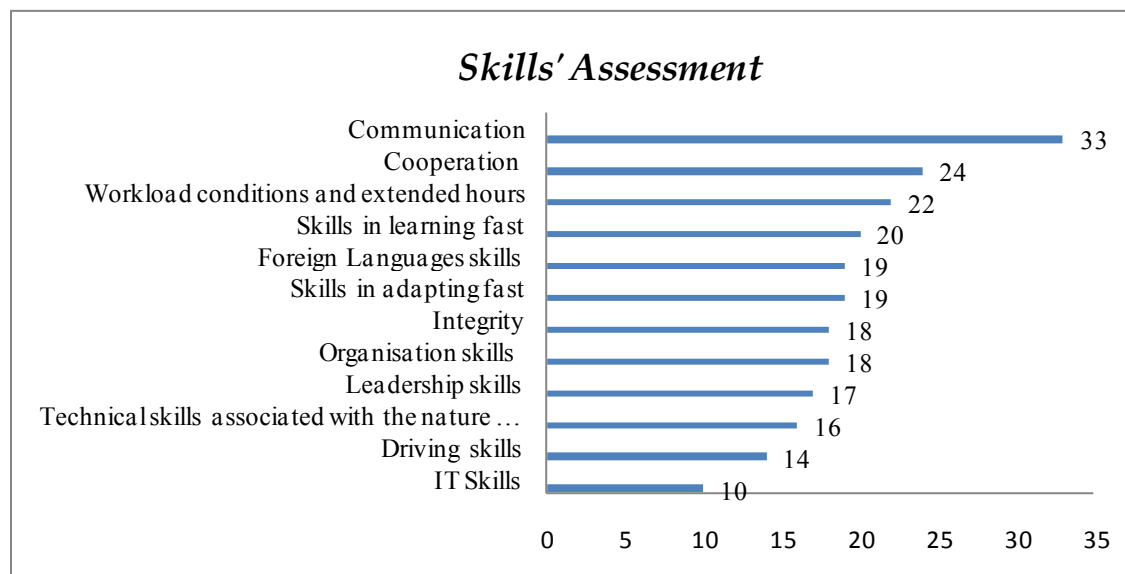


Fig. 2: Skills assessment, ranking skills from the most to the least important ones



Businesses have also been asked about the weakest point of their employees, in which they would like to see improvements.

The following table no. 4 summarizes some of the answers according to the five-industry classification.

Table 4. The weakest point of the employees according to industry-classification businesses

Industry	Employees' weakest point
<b>Building/Construction</b>	- Lack of professional skills
<b>Production</b>	- Communication skills -Lack of motivation and desire to work
<b>Free profession</b>	-Reinforcement of basic professional knowledge. -Personal and joint hygiene in the workplace
<b>Service</b>	-Lack of skill in working independently - Lack of experience -Lack of availability -Lack of motivation - The continuous request for a pay rise in cases of weak performances -Slowness in learning a job. -Tidiness and cleanliness in the personal or joint work environments -Mobile use during working - Non-expected productivity
<b>Trading/Marketing</b>	- Lack of motivation and willingness - lack of communication and ethical norms -Lack of personal development in terms of work -Instability and rapid movement of the employees - The missing experience increases training and time cost.

Another issue upon which businesses have been asked about in the questionnaire is that of businesses' preferences in terms of their preferred gender for recruitment.



Fig. 3: Business preferences over preferred gender for recruitment

The above Figure presents business preferences over the gender that is usually preferred for recruitment. Results show that for most businesses in Elbasan, gender is not essential. Businesses and the service industry in particular, do agree that what is important is the appropriate possession of skills and competencies and the realization of the final product in the required quality rather than the gender of the employee.

Referring to the question of businesses' preferences about the educational level of their employees, the following Figure illustrates the questionnaires' answers. The question was addressed to most employees, and higher education was assumed by all businesses as a necessity for the managerial part.

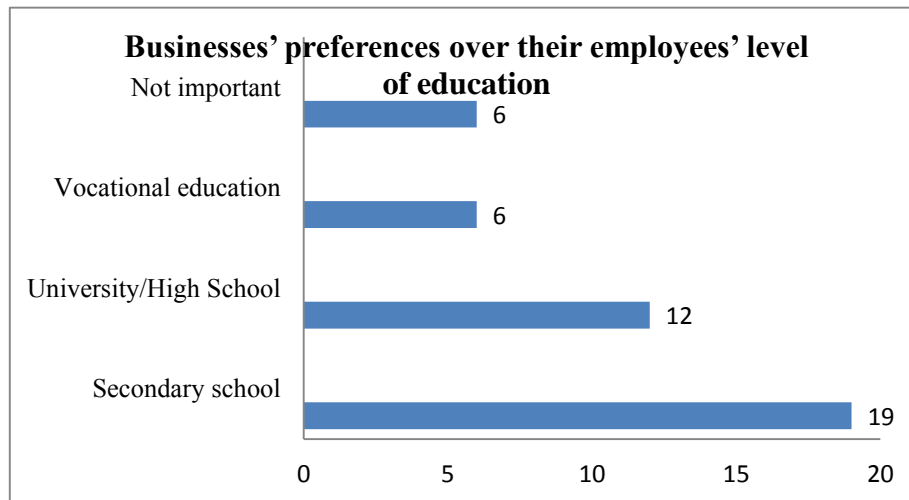


Fig. 4: Businesses' preferences over their employees' level of education

As can also be observed from the above Figure, education is another issue most businesses do consider to improve their employability. It turns out that they prefer secondary education as a criterion for their employees. 12 out of the total number of businesses consider higher education as an essential one. Meanwhile, only six businesses prefer vocational training/education. The same percentage goes with the choice of "Not important". Some relevant studies can be found in [12] and [13].

## 5 Conclusions / Recommendations

- In the mid-term business plans for expansion, only 1/3 of them would need professions other than the current ones. Statistically, 26% of businesses plan to include new profiles during their activity;

and 74% will continue to offer the same products or services.

- An employee's roles in a small business (but not necessarily only in a small business) are not clearly defined, creating, in reality, the multi-tasking employee who struggles to realize the assigned tasks rather than thinking of the quality.
- Communication skill is estimated to be the most important skill out of many others;

85% of the businesses do share the same opinion on this. Meanwhile, the two other most evaluated skills are cooperation and working under workload conditions and extended hours.

- Another important factor that emerges from the large sampled businesses taken into

consideration for the realization of this research is that the employers do not give importance to specific professions such as marketing/manager or specialist, import-export manager, human resource manager, IT specialists, etc. These professions are currently offered by higher education in Albania. Due to the above reasons these professions may affect the current graduates, reducing the interest among young people to pursue higher education, oriented to these professions due to the lack of a labor market. Such general trends are bound to affect youth's career choices in the future, creating a gap between university or vocational education offers and the labor market's needs, which will be reflected in future labor market vacancies.

- Results show that most businesses in Elbasan are indifferent to gender preferences for recruitment. What matters for them is the possession of the right competencies/skills rather than gender.
- Among the generated results, what needs to be highlighted concerning the business's employees' recruitment procedure is that businesses in Elbasan widely use personal acquaintances regardless of their industry or business size, even though these businesses want their employees to be more professionally trained and skilled.
- Most businesses prefer secondary education for their employees. 12 businesses consider higher education as an essential level of education for most professions. In terms of vocational education, it has been taken into consideration only by 6 businesses. Furthermore, the same number goes for the choice "Not important".
- Almost all businesses seem to struggle with the relationship between the employees and their clients, in terms of communication and behavior. So, after each educational level is chosen, improvement of communication skills is required.

What our society needs is a shift to a system that inspires the love and passion for learning; preparing our citizens for the real world, which thanks to the development of technology is rapidly changing. We as individuals and employees, need to identify and

master new skills to fairly compete in the labor market. Only in this way can humans match the society and businesses' needs and their acquired hard/soft skills and competencies guaranteeing a prosperous future for their families and ambitions too.

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#### **Contribution of Individual Authors to the Creation of a Scientific Article (Ghostwriting Policy)**

-Elvira Fetahu carried out the formal analysis, the investigation process, methodology, supervision and the resources selected for the compilation of the paper.

-Lenida Lekli was responsible for the draft writing, draft editing and the final publication version.

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The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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