



## Article

# How to Make University Graduates More Competitive in Today's Job Market

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**Abstract:** As the global economy shifts towards innovation-driven growth, the demand for highly skilled university graduates is growing. In Uzbekistan, significant reforms are being undertaken to enhance the higher education system and produce specialists capable of driving economic progress. However, the alignment between the competencies of university graduates and the needs of the labor market remains insufficient, with many graduates struggling to find the job. This article explores the concept of university graduates competitiveness, focusing on both hard and soft skills as key determinants of employability. It examines various theoretical approaches to graduate competitiveness, dividing them into four main groups: cognitive, competence-based, market-oriented, and structured approaches. These frameworks emphasize different aspects of graduate capabilities, such as academic knowledge, personal traits, and readiness for professional life. The article argues that soft skills—such as critical thinking, teamwork, and adaptability—are increasingly essential for graduates to thrive in the modern labor market, where technical knowledge alone is no longer enough. In conclusion, the paper proposes a comprehensive definition of graduate competitiveness, suggesting that universities must equip students with the necessary skills to navigate a rapidly changing workforce, ensuring their success in both local and global job markets.

**Keywords:** graduates, competitiveness, labor market, employability skills, competencies, soft skill and hard skills.

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## 1. Introduction

In the context of transitioning to an innovative economy, the demand for specialists with higher education is growing. Young specialists—university graduates—are more capable than others of perceiving and applying new scientific ideas, progressive technologies, and management methods in practice, which are essential for increasing a country's competitiveness and improving its population's standard of living.

In the Republic of Uzbekistan, large-scale reforms are being implemented to improve the higher education system, enhance the quality of education, and train specialists with higher education. For instance, the "Concept for the Development of the Higher Education System of the Republic of Uzbekistan until 2030" [Presidential Decree of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2019] and several other regulatory documents have been adopted.

Despite these efforts, the higher education system remains poorly adapted to the conditions of an innovative economy. The level and quality of specialist training in universities do not align with the needs of economic and social development as a whole.

As a result, young specialists struggle to find suitable jobs. This situation suggests that university graduates are not always able to compete successfully in the labor market—i.e., they are less capable than other candidates of meeting employers' requirements in terms of knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal qualities. Today, for a university graduate to be competitive in a rapidly changing world, they must possess critical thinking skills, the ability to independently search for information, and the capacity for systematic analysis.

In this regard, the issue of increasing the competitiveness of university graduates is one of the urgent problems facing higher education, requiring scientific research to identify effective mechanisms and methods to enhance the competitiveness of graduates.

### **Literature review**

They argue that the competitiveness of graduates is an integral indicator that reflects the graduate's readiness for future professional activities. It includes competencies that affect employability and are defined by the general and specific requirements of employers. For example Oganeseva V.A. defines a competitive specialist as “a professional worker who can present themselves as a product in the labor market, demand a fair price for their work, ensure well-being for themselves and their family, and fulfill a current societal need.”

The fourth group of scholars, in their scientific works (Maksimov G.K., Pronyushkina T.G., Korneichenko N.V., Myasnikova L., Shutkina Zh.A., Garafutdinova N.Ya., Potapova E.V., and Kirzhbaum O.), defines the essence of the concept of the competitiveness of university graduates as integrated qualities grouped into specific categories. This approach has been named the structured approach. For instance, Maksimov G.K. identifies the following parameters as characteristics of competitive graduates: Technological (methods, techniques, and technologies for professional training of specialists); Psychological (motivation, competence, and the structure of essential professional qualities); Acmeological (focus on self-development, the presence of personal models for developing professional careers and competitiveness).

Pronyushkina T.G. (2008) outlines the following structure of competitiveness, which includes three main characteristics: Cognitive (knowledge, intellectual skills, high-quality performance of specific tasks based on existing knowledge, or the use of knowledge in changing conditions); Communicative (the ability and skill to utilize the cognitive mechanisms of others); Activity-related (personal qualities that facilitate positive interactions and goal achievement).

Myasnikova L. (2006) proposes the following concept: what makes a person competitive in society is not the memorization of specific knowledge but the acquisition of particular abilities and competencies. The primary competencies include: Technical (acquiring communication skills); Professional (turning an individual into a marketable product); Self-management (the ability to reorganize, retrain, and develop new skills relevant to solving a task); Administrative (managing people, setting tasks, and delegating authority).

Shutkina Zh.A. (2008) suggests a pedagogical model for developing the competitiveness of university graduates based on three main indicators of key competencies: Subject-personal: qualities that characterize an individual as a personality and a subject of communication and activity; Organizational-activity: qualities that characterize an individual as a subject of activity and self-organization; Social-communicative: qualities that characterize an individual in relation to society.

According to Kirzhbaum O.(2007) the indicators of graduate competitiveness, formed and developed during professional education, can be grouped into three main blocks: professional qualifications of graduates; motivational potential of graduates; marketing potential of graduates.

In our opinion, despite some differences in the requirements for the competitiveness of university graduates, the definitions provided by all the forementioned authors share a common idea: a university graduate, as a candidate for an interesting and creative job, must possess not only a high level of theoretical professional knowledge but also the ability to apply it in practice. Today, employers need not just a knowledge holder or diploma owner but an initiator, a regenerator, a co-participant in the introduction of innovative methods for production and management development.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The methodology for the article is derived from both literature review and practical approaches to understanding and addressing challenges in online language teaching. The research utilized a qualitative design, involving an in-depth analysis of primary and secondary sources to evaluate best practices, common obstacles, and innovative strategies in the field. Academic journals, conference proceedings, and official reports were consulted to gain a theoretical understanding of online teaching frameworks and methodologies. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with experienced English language instructors who had taught in virtual environments, allowing for the collection of insights regarding technological integration, student engagement, and resource optimization. The participants were selected based on their diverse teaching backgrounds, representing a range of instructional contexts such as private language centers, secondary schools, and universities. Data were transcribed, coded, and thematically analyzed to identify recurring themes and practical strategies that could enhance the effectiveness of online teaching. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process, ensuring participants' anonymity and obtaining informed consent for their contributions. This methodology aimed to bridge the gap between theoretical perspectives and the practical experiences of educators, emphasizing actionable solutions tailored to the dynamic nature of online language instruction. The findings were contextualized within existing pedagogical models, providing a comprehensive framework for overcoming challenges in virtual teaching and improving overall outcomes for both instructors and learners.

## 3. Results

The research analysis highlighted graduate competitiveness traits that match up directly with contemporary employer preferences according to the author's conclusion. A successful professional must possess both their career-specific skills (hard skills) and personal appropriate capabilities (soft skills) which recent employers consider vital. Modern organizations need all these elements to form the complete skills required by today's demanding and competitive employment environment.

Analogous to computer terminology "hardware" and "software" the English language terms "hard skills" and "soft skills" emerged. In the context of computers, hardware refers to the tangible, physical components of a computer system, such as the processor, memory, and motherboard. Hardware pieces constitute important requirements which ensure machines run effectively. Computers remain powerless to execute their functions unless software – programs which guide hardware activities – exists. Human competencies exist in the same functional relationship as physical hardware in relation to software. Technical skills such as hardware represent permanent and measurable abilities which people develop through standardized teaching institutions combined with training and practical work experience. People need to possess three elements to be effective: they need technical understanding and expert proficiency with particular tools and methodological approaches as well as specific field expertise. A software engineer demonstrates hard skills by mastering multiple programming languages while doctors develop their hard skills through exceptional surgical technique proficiency.

Just like software empowers computers to reach their maximum capacity soft skills empower people to maximize the effectiveness of their hard skills. People use soft skills which are intangible character traits to determine their workplace relationships and address job-related difficulties. Comprehensive competencies required for success at work consist of communication ability together with teamwork skills and problem-solving capability along with adaptability attributes and emotional intelligence attributes and leadership attributes. Value-based competencies referred to as soft skills enable people to thrive in collaborative settings and achieve organizational success even though technical expertise determines task execution ability.

At first sight effective performance seems to need professionals who understand specific job abilities (hard skills), or professional competencies. The abilities directly power the implementation of particular tasks. Contrary to common expectation research along with practical knowledge indicates that people who reach important career milestones and excessive income gains coupled with rapid professional advancement mostly do not rely solely on technical excellence. People who display well-developed soft skills succeed most in their professional lives. The acquired skills empower workers to lead teams effectively and adjust to changes and settle conflicts and establish meaningful professional relationships which proves essential to contemporary work environments.

Academic research alongside professional training programs and labor market analytics have spent much of the past several decades assessing and developing the skills employers require. Hard skills receive research emphasis because they demonstrate concrete measurable qualities. The key selection standards used during recruitment frequently place technical certifications above all other qualifications including expertise band experience. The spotlight on hard skills often belittles soft skills although they remain equally important or surpass them in importance for enduring professional growth. Sidestep assessment of soft competencies remains difficult but their role in team success represents their critical importance in organizational culture formation.

Educational institutions give more importance to theoretical subjects than practical areas of employment resulting in graduates being professionally less prepared than employers desire. Many educational institutions successfully teach technical knowledge to students yet few systems integrate extensive soft skill development training into their academic programs. New graduates frequently face difficulties with communication plus critical thinking and adaptability according to employer reports although they excel in technical areas because these soft skills remain vital in our fast-changing professional world.

Importance will increase for developing skills through a comprehensive framework. Educational curricula together with training programs must make space to develop student capabilities in both technical competencies and soft skill competencies simultaneously. Employers together with policymakers need to promote soft skills inclusion in their workforce development frameworks. To tackle the complete requirements of contemporary employers and thrive in advanced collaborative business environments graduates need to achieve equal mastery of hard and soft skills.

Graduate success alongside competitive job placement requires both hard skill mastery alongside soft skill development. People need advanced technical abilities to establish themselves in their profession yet they need interpersonal abilities to utilize their learned knowledge effectively throughout complicated work settings. Labor marketplace changes will continue to demand individuals who master these specific skill combinations because they form the groundwork for professional development and organizational flexibility.

#### **4. Discussion**

Today, to be a competitive professional, one needs not only professional skills but also soft skills. A study conducted at Harvard University highlights that job success depends 85% on well-developed soft skills and only 15% on hard skills. Consequently, during interviews, employers often ask candidates to answer questions or complete tasks that are not directly related to the professional skills specific to the job.

Additionally, according to estimates from the global McKinsey Institute (2021) by 2030, approximately 400 million specialists performing highly specialized work could be replaced by robots. Automation, however, will not affect tasks involving people management and social interactions. This demonstrates that while artificial intelligence can assist in solving technical problems, it is unlikely to replace humans in areas requiring communication, strategic thinking, or creative thought. Often, graduates struggle to perform successfully in the workplace because their competitiveness is significantly lower compared to experienced employees. Even graduates from top universities often lag behind workers with substantial experience in terms of competitiveness.

There are various definitions and classifications of the term "soft skills." For instance, in World Health Organization (1993) studies, these skills are referred to as "life skills." Scholars such as Moore and Morton (2017) define them as "21st-century skills," while the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) refers to them as "transversal skills." In essence, these are skills that help workers perform effectively and remain competitive in the labor market.

The importance of soft skills is emphasized by analysts at the Economic Forum, who identified ten core competencies that would be in high demand by 2020. (Ananyeva, T. 2019). According to this forecast, the most relevant skill is problem-solving. The second most important is critical thinking, followed by creativity. Other key competencies include people management, coordination and collaboration, emotional intelligence, judgment and decision-making, customer orientation, negotiation skills, and cognitive flexibility. All of these are categorized as soft skills.

An analysis of specialized literature reveals that there is currently no universally accepted or precise definition of the term "soft skills" in the scientific community.

Most foreign authors, including S. Muhleisen and N. Oberhuber (2005) define "soft skills" as personal qualities that make interactions with others more effective and harmonious.

University of Chicago professors Heckman and Kautz (2012) consider soft skills to be personal traits that are shaped by an individual's goals, motivations, and preferences, which are highly valued in the labor market.

In our view, the most comprehensive definition of soft skills was provided by Austrian scholar Hazelberger (2012) in his work "Modernizing Higher Education through the Accreditation of Soft Skills." He states, "Soft skills represent a dynamic combination of cognitive and meta-cognitive skills, interpersonal, intellectual, and practical abilities. Soft skills help individuals adapt and maintain a positive attitude so they can effectively address the challenges of their professional and everyday lives."

Thus, soft skills are associated with a broad spectrum of interpersonal and social qualities and competencies that can be transferred across different sectors of the economy and industries. Grugulis (2009) point out that "soft skills" are closely linked to employability, especially for young graduates entering the labor market for the first time.

Thus, employers need employees who possess soft skills, and, in turn, young people should be given opportunities to develop these skills at universities. The development of soft skills such as entrepreneurial abilities, creative problem-solving skills, teamwork, adaptability to various conditions, conflict management, and resilience in challenging or stressful situations allows graduates to become competitive in the labor market.

Therefore, we maintain that the conceptual foundation for preparing a competitive specialist lies in their competencies, which serve as a measure of the ability to apply acquired educational knowledge to practical, cognitive, value-oriented, and



communicative problems in real life. In this regard, we believe that the key aspect of forming a competitive graduate personality is not so much the opportunity to gain specific knowledge, but the ability to apply this knowledge in practice.

## 5. Conclusion

A systematic evaluation of graduate competitiveness definitions led our team to develop a functional definition. A university graduate attracts labor market successes through their skill to gain employment in their academic field by optimizing their professional capabilities (hard skills) and emotional abilities (soft skills) towards employer requirements and personal evaluative criteria. Competitiveness within today's job market represents an individual's capacity to excel both in technical competencies and interpersonal and organizational management of relationships.

Professional success in employment demands organizations to evaluate hard skills combined with the development of soft skills as fundamental components. Employability traces its roots to hard skills which comprise expert technical abilities and professional knowledge which graduates gain through formal educational paths. As important as hard skills are they require soft skills such as communication and adaptability along with teamwork abilities and emotional intelligence for graduates to succeed in complex interpersonal work settings. Employers choose candidates showing this balance between hard and soft skills because it lets employees fulfill their responsibilities with excellence while easily blending into teams and eliminating workplace changes while producing valuable organizational performance.

The definition includes "subjective preferences of employers" as a variable to demonstrate the fluctuating elements of labor market performance assessment. Employer expectations tend to reflect the special characteristics of their organizational cultural foundations and strategic business directions. Graduates must show adaptability by modifying their abilities to match changing employer preferences which vary between workplaces.

The ultimate purpose of this definition necessitates an integrated strategy to train graduates using technical expertise and people skills needed to succeed across different workplace environments.

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