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# SOCIAL SKILLS OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN THAILAND AND LATVIA: RESULTS OF A SURVEY

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## ABSTRACT

The role of the university is to educate and train professionals to meet the changing demands of the labour market. Industry 5.0, which characterises the current labour market, emphasises the human centre, and social skills are increasingly recognized as critical competencies enabling individuals to work effectively in complex, interconnected environments. The objective of this study is to analyse Thai and Latvian students' social skill development with the help of a self-response Social Skills of University Students (SSUS) questionnaire and find the most important factors in it. The research was carried out in 2023–2024 in Thailand and Latvia. The SSUS questionnaire consisted of 58 statements. A five-point Likert scale for student response was used, and descriptive and conclusive statistics methods were used to determine central tendencies of social skill development. The participants were 955 students of both genders from 15 universities across Thailand and 154 students from the Riga Stradinsh University, Latvian Academy of Sport Education. Cronbach's Alpha of the Thai scale was 0.91, of Latvian – 0.90. Using exploratory factor analysis six factors characterizing social skills were revealed: Self-responsibility skills, Social relationship skills, Self-awareness skills, Teamwork-building skills, Social networking skills and Communication skills. A list of statements with loadings > 0.40, is the same in both countries. Moreover, in Social-relationship skills both countries included the statements "I believe that honesty is the foundation of trust" and "I listen and ask to understand others' advice and suggestions". Thai female students had higher all six social competencies/skills than male students with one exception – Thai male students were more skilled in social networking. In Latvia insignificant differences in strategy use between genders were found – females tended to use them more, Year 4 students were found to use more strategies than Year 1 and Year 2 students, full-time students – more than part-time ones, but no differences were found in social strategy use among sports industry qualifications.

***Keywords:*** *higher education institutions (HEI)s, Latvia, social skills, Thailand*

## Introduction

The university should educate and train professionals to meet the changing demands of the labour market. The undergraduate students should have different social skills in order to satisfactorily deal with the demands of various environments.

In professional context social skills are associated with higher professional success and greater achievement, as well as better developed professional leadership. Regardless of them, social skills are reported to foster better physical well-being. Social competence is increasingly recognized as a predictor of a list of public health outcomes, including education, employment, criminal activity, substance use, mental health, well-being and higher quality of life in general (e.g., Jones et al., 2015; Conley et al., 2015; Lopes, 2015; Khampirat et al., 2024).

Social skills are identified as pivotal employability skills for graduates, and they extend beyond the confines of academic knowledge, playing an instrumental role in shaping successful trajectories (Thomas, 2023). Social skills impact graduates' ability to navigate a rapidly evolving professional landscape, the capacity to motivate others leads to effective team collaboration and leadership, and the ability to build and maintain relationships is needed in networking and collaboration attempts. The evolving landscape of work and career trajectories underscores the enduring relevance of social skills, positioning them as a linchpin in the paradigm of contemporary education and employability (Ćurlin et al., 2020; Khampirat et al., 2024).

In the European Union (EU) context, the correlation between transversal skills and employability is significant. The EU places great importance on ensuring the employability of a digitally skilled workforce as a vital objective for promoting its growth. In a more digitalised world, new ways of thinking will result in changes in the labour market and society, and people must be able to move from one job to another. Transversal skills encompass such soft skills as flexibility, adaptability, and interpersonal abilities, enabling individuals to solve problems, communicate and collaborate efficiently and effectively in teams.

Tadjer et al. (2018) presented the first results of a study to determine the most important social skills of students in higher education. The social skills most cited by the participants were "politeness", "confidence and self-esteem", "respect for other points of view", "ability to communicate well with others" and "help others". At the end of the previous century, Goleman (1995) defined soft skills as *emotional intelligence*.

However, the question remains – what do they characterize and how to develop them? Robles (2012, p. 457) argues that soft skills refer to "traits, attitudes and behaviours" and are "intangible, nontechnical, personality specific skills that determine one's strength as a leader facilitator, mediator and negotiator".

Soft skills can also be categorized as "personal qualities" and "interpersonal skills" (Schulz (2008, p. 146). Bailley and Lene (2013) also included emotional skills within their definition of soft skills, along with behaviour, psychological and relational skills. Relational skills, such as being able to communicate effectively as well as an ability to

interact with others with empathy and enthusiasm also suggest "emotional qualities" of soft skills (Bailley & Lene, 2013, p. 81).

Kim, Erdem, Byun, Jeong (2011) tap into skills at a personal level suggesting that soft skills incorporate ethics, tolerance, amiability and responsibility. Such "intrapersonal qualities" as "one's ability to manage oneself" are also linked with interpersonal abilities such as "how one handles one's interactions with others" (Laker & Powell, 2011, p. 113). Rauen (2001) mentions that social competence incorporates self-confidence, empathy, communication skills, willingness and ability to cooperate, and ability to deal with conflict. Self-confidence, meaning being able to assess one's own strengths and weaknesses, is close to self-awareness, which entails ability to reflect on oneself. Empathy implies being able to understand other people, including their thoughts and actions. Communication focuses on verbal and non-verbal communication, being able to rightly interpret the communication of another person. This also includes such skills as being able to see and cope with problems and misunderstandings. Willingness and ability to cooperate entails ability to be a team member, trying to achieve common goals, and reach a compromise. The ability to deal with conflicts means being able to face and mediate them neutrally, or, in the case when one cannot be neutral, refer to an advisor.

Baker and O'Brien (2017) propose a promising categorization of social skills into "personal qualities" and interpersonal skills (Schulz, 2008, p. 146). Bailley and Lene (2013) also included emotional skills within their definition of soft skills, along with behaviour, psychological and relational skills. Relational skills, such as being able to communicate effectively as well as an ability to interact with others with empathy and enthusiasm also suggest "emotional qualities" of soft skills (Bailley & Lene, 2013, p. 81).

Importantly, Seal et al. (2006) argues, social intelligence can be taught and acquired over time through experience. Laker and Powell (2011) emphasize that making a clear distinction between soft skills and hard skills is critically important because soft skills require different training methods to those employed when training for hard skills.

Merriam & Leahy's (2005) recognize that the transfer of soft skills to the workplace is often difficult to achieve. Developing these skills requires practice and investment (Heckman & Kautz, 2012), and research about the circumstances of this transfer is scarce (Lake & Powell, 2011). Employers tend to assume that soft skills are innate, and they intend to leave the task of developing them to the employees themselves (Bailly & Lene, 2013). Baker & O'Brien (2017) suggest that a promising way to develop soft skills in university courses are outdoor activities.

## Social skills in sports industry

Social competence in European sports industry was thoroughly studied by Baker et al. (2014), who concluded that sport and recreation employers and employees evaluated highly all employability skills, rating higher than others such inner factors as ability and willingness to learn, energy and passion, teamwork and cooperation, and communication.

Greek (Tsitskari, Goudas, Tsalouchou & Michalopoulou, 2017) subsample of employers provided similar results, main factors being: Professional Behaviour & Development, Leadership & Influence, Problem Solving, Organization & Time Management, Communication Ability and (Inter)Personal skills. Tsitskari et al. (2017) reported that all factors were highly rated by the employers, and there were no differences between industry sectors. In our opinion, Tsitskari et al. (Tsitskari, Goudas, Tsalouchou & Michalopoulou, 2017) Communication Ability and Problem Solving are in line with two factors, distinguished by Rauen (Rauen, 2001) – Communication and ability to deal with conflicts; Tsitskar's et al. (2017) (Inter)Personal skills are in line with two Rauen factors – self-confidence and empathy. Tsitskari et al. (2017) has no doubt that by knowing the skills expected by employers, universities may enhance the graduates' employability through better aligning undergraduate programs with industry needs.

These generic skills are essentially important for sport organizations, as they deal with different target groups with diverse psychological or physiological parameters. One specific finding was that sport employers evaluated Leadership skills as the least important of the competences expected. Baker et al. (2014) also concluded that Leadership was one of the skills and attributes that sport employers in Europe assess as slightly less important.

Baker et al. (2014) results showed no effect of the employment sector on employability skills. Minten & Forsyth (Minten & Forsyth, 2014) emphasize that sports graduates develop careers in a wide range of occupational areas – (PE teachers, sport trainers, outdoor recreation, etc.) and outside (e.g. physiotherapy, army, civil servants, etc.) of sport. Consequently, sport HEIs should reinforce their graduates with a range of social skills that will enable them to thrive in a variety of working environments and career areas (Minten & Forsyth, 2014).

### Social skills for sport coaches and managers

Rauen (Rauen, 2001) reminds that ideally, the socially competent coach should also be a role model through his behaviour. He emphasizes that social skills require broad knowledge and experience, and all of them can be successfully trained. Moreover, these skills are topical not only in coaching, but also, for example, in management. No successful manager can do with specialist knowledge alone.

A study in Germany (Thiel et al., 2005/06) makes recommendations for the development of a curriculum for teaching social competence within coach training. They suggest further expansion of social science subject areas and an integration of training content in the coach training, relate knowledge to its application. Paar & Frei (2019/2020) reflect on social skills of teachers and trainers, implementing this education. The authors emphasize that adult educators should organize learning in a socially and professionally responsible manner, foster the development of learner potential, offering learning opportunities.

Thiel et al. (2005/06) are sure that the key to sporting success in top-level sport is social competence, representing a "skill mix" to which can be assigned such special communicative characteristics as communication skills, the ability to accept criticism,

the ability to deal with conflict and leadership skills, as well as such inner personality factors as charisma and knowledge of human nature. However, the situational context is also important, in elite youth sports – the ability to manage the social environment, while in the area of team sports – the ability to lead groups and promote team building. The authors also define social competence as a multifaceted means of problem solving. Communication requires consideration of the specific identity and individuality of the communication partner also in terms of age and gender and common cultural and social background. The focus in terms of regulating conflicts is primarily on managing potential conflicts. Finally, the authors acknowledge the fact that progress in medical and training science performance management is reaching its limits, therefore, specific social skills of coaches are an important potential for further improvement.

Apitzsch (2012) focuses on coaches and sports managers in professional team sports. The author concludes that nowadays coaches also take on a managerial role in their work. Apitzsch used the Heyse and Erpenbeck 64 sub-competencies competency atlas for examining the competencies of coaches and sports managers. Top performers are distinguished particularly through personal competencies, and social competencies will become even more important in the future. For coaches and sports managers, mobility is replaced by flexibility. The emphasis on networking in the context of relationship management is appropriate for both groups. For trainers, there are coaching skills instead of consulting skills and motivation skills instead of optimism/enthusiasm.

### Social skills for recreation specialists and sports (PE) teachers

Baker & O'Brien (2017), speaking about skills and abilities of outdoor activity facilitators (recreation specialists), emphasize emotional perception, management and processing, as well as interpersonal connection and communication. Harun and Salamuddin (2014) indicate that exposure to outdoor education activities have a significant impact on subjects' social skills, namely, on the aspects of leadership, academic, personality and interpersonal relationships. Collaborative problem-solving requires clear communication, and a cohesive group is better equipped to face challenges. Karisman (2022) reminds that outdoor education, in which both recreation specialists and sports (PE) teachers can be engaged, can improve students' social skills, which will be very important and useful to easily adapt to the environment both with human beings and with the nature. To develop these skills in others, PE teachers and recreators need to possess them themselves.

## Methodology

To identify the most essential factors in student reported soft skills, exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis with Principal Component Analysis as an extraction factor was carried out. Factor analysis was started with Kaiser (1974) suggestion that KMO > .9 were marvellous, in the .80s, meritorious, in the .70s, middling, in the .60s, mediocre, in the .50s,

miserable, and less than .5, unacceptable. Hair et al. (2010) suggest accepting a value > 0.5. Values between 0.5 and 0.7 are mediocre, and values between 0.7 and 0.8 are good.

Using Kaiser's criterion, factors with an eigenvalue of more than 1.00 shall be retained. Another criterion is image factoring or Scree test – looking for break in a line or change of direction, and retaining all of the factors above (Pallant, 2020). After finding the number of factors, rotation will be used to obtain a simpler solution. Oblique (Oblimin) and orthogonal (e.g. Varimax) rotations was performed, and "the clearest and easiest one" were reported (Pallant, 2020, p.183).

In Thailand, exploratory factor analysis of university student social skills SUSS questionnaire with 58 items was carried out. In Latvia, confirmatory factor analysis of sport student social skills was employed. In Thailand, six factors were selected, namely – self-responsibility, social relationship, self-awareness, teamwork-building, social networking, and communication skills (Khampirat et al., 2024). In Latvian research, the same SUSS questionnaire was used, confirmatory factor analysis was employed, and in line with Thai research six most important factors were selected.

Moreover, descriptive and conclusive statistics was applied to find confirmed differences in soft skill reported use between different country, study program, study year, study form – full and part time students, and gender students.

## Participants

### Thailand

From Thailand, there were 955 participants from 15 universities, presenting a diverse demographic profile: 20% were males and 80% – females, their ages ranging mostly from 19–22 years. Most reported GPAs between 2.51 and 3.50 (58%), with the largest groups majoring in Business Administration/Management (32%) and Marketing (29%). About 41% were final-year students, reflecting academic maturity. Parents generally had low educational backgrounds, with nearly three-quarters having only primary or secondary education.

### Latvia

The participants were 154 Latvian higher education institution (HEI) male and female students, both in full- and part-time Bachelor in Sport Science programs, Year 1 to Year 5 students, having chosen the following sports industry qualifications – sports coach, sports manager, sports (PE) teacher, and recreation specialist.

65 were males, 78 females, and 11 did not state their gender. 19 represented Year 1, 61 – Year 2, 20 – Year 3, 48 – Year 4, 1 – Year 5 and 5 missed to indicate this feature. 95, in their turn, were full time, 54 – part time students, and 5 students did not indicate their form of study.

120 students reported that one of their two qualifications was a sports coach, 27 did not have this qualification, and 7 did not answer this question. 62 students chose a sports manager as one of their two qualifications, 83 did not do it, and 9 did not answer the question. A sports (PE) teacher is one of two qualifications for 98 participants, 48 students

do not have it, and 8 failed to respond. A recreator is one of two qualifications for 9 participants, 136 students do not have it, and 9 did not answer this question. The study was conducted in conformance with research ethics procedures, as confirmed by the Human Research Ethics Committees of the universities involved in the study (see the Ethics Committees' statements further down below).

## Results

### Thailand

#### Descriptive statistics

The descriptive results of the 59 SOCS items indicate that students generally rated their competencies positively, with most average scores between 3.7 and 4.5.

Problem-solving and analytical skills were rated relatively high, such as "assessing situations, identifying problems, and evaluating solutions" ($M$ = 3.84, $SD$ = 0.82), "recognizing dimensions of a problem and identifying root causes" ($M$ = 3.81, $SD$ = 0.82), and "analyzing possible solutions quickly" ($M$ = 3.92, $SD$ = 0.84). These results suggest students feel fairly confident in their critical thinking abilities.

Teamwork and interpersonal competencies were among the strongest areas. High ratings were reported for "working well with other students and team leaders" ($M$ = 4.16, $SD$ = 0.82), "caring about other people's feelings" ($M$ = 4.35, $SD$ = 0.77), "complimenting others' accomplishments" ($M$ = 4.52, $SD$ = 0.72), and "thinking that helping each other benefits society" ($M$ = 4.48, $SD$ = 0.74). These scores highlight strong empathy, cooperation, and social responsibility.

Communication skills showed mixed results. While students rated themselves moderately on "communicating easily and effectively with others" ($M$ = 3.95, $SD$ = 0.85) and "listening to understand instructions and others' viewpoints" ($M$ = 4.14, $SD$ = 0.79), lower scores were found for "presenting work clearly and confidently" ($M$ = 3.65, $SD$ = 0.95) and "especially speaking English in front of the public" ($M$ = 2.96, $SD$ = 1.24). This indicates that oral English proficiency and presentation skills are key areas for improvement.

Self-awareness and responsibility were rated positively. Students agreed with statements such as "being true to their own values" ($M$ = 4.37, $SD$ = 0.79), "believing honesty is the basis for trust" ($M$ = 4.48, $SD$ = 0.76), and "taking full responsibility for actions" ($M$ = 4.29, $SD$ = 0.79). These results suggest strong ethical and self-regulatory tendencies.

Motivation and persistence also emerged as strengths, with students endorsing items like "working hard to secure a better future" ($M$ = 4.02, $SD$ = 0.89) and "believing hard work will pay off" ($M$ = 4.19, $SD$ = 0.85).

However, some emotional regulation items revealed greater variability. For example, "mood predictability received lower ratings" ($M$ = 3.56, $SD$ = 1.12), suggesting less consistency in emotional stability compared with other areas.

Overall, students demonstrated strong empathy, responsibility, and teamwork skills, alongside moderate problem-solving ability. The main developmental needs appear in

English communication, public speaking, and emotional regulation, which showed lower averages and higher variability compared with other competencies.

### Factor analysis

In Thai research six factors were selected, having similar factor loadings. They were Self-responsibility skills, Social relationship skills, Self-awareness skills, Teamwork-building skills, Social networking, and Category of Communication. For all six factors standardized factor loadings were determined.

Self-responsibility skills, measured by 21 item (standardized factor loading or standardized regression weight was 0.949*) can be characterized by, for example, such statements as *I analyse possible solutions quickly to select the most appropriate one, I have learnt about myself and how I see the world, I welcome suggestions for improvements from my team*.

Eight items focus on Social relationship skills (factor loading 0.977*) – *I care about other people's feelings, I believe honesty is the basis for trust, I listen and ask questions in order to understand instructions and other people's points of view,* to name just some of them.

A few examples of statements about Self-awareness skills (ten items, factor loading 0.993*) are *I worked hard in university to improve myself as a person* and *I decide to do things on the spur of the moment.*

In the category of Teamwork-building skills (five items, factor loading 1.000*) fell the following statements – *I can lead a team work at university or workplace, I can assess situations, identify problems and evaluate solutions* and *I recognize the many dimensions of a problem and can determine a root cause.*

The category of Social networking (factor loading 0.961*) comprises ten statements, among them – *I prefer using social media sites to attending social gatherings, I can use social media sites for strengthening interpersonal relationships, I can use social media sites to become more sociable.*

The category of Communication (factor loading 0.979) assembles four statements, among them – *My moods are predictable, I can speak, listen, read and write English clearly, I am feeling more optimistic and positive than usual.*

***Table 1*** Independent *t*-test. Differences in strategy use for genders

| Social competencies/skills | male | female | male | female | t-test |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | |
| Self-responsibility skills (SRS) | 3.96 | 0.60 | 4.06 | 0.59 | –2.13* |
| Social relationship skills (REL) | 4.06 | 0.61 | 4.16 | 0.62 | –1.99* |
| Self-awareness skills (AWR) | 3.31 | 0.79 | 3.41 | 0.76 | –1.597 |
| Teamwork-building skills (TWB) | 4.19 | 0.59 | 4.33 | 0.54 | –3.10** |
| Social networking skills (NET) | 3.77 | 0.68 | 3.74 | 0.69 | 0.61 |
| Communication skills (COM) | 3.79 | 0.62 | 3.91 | 0.61 | –2.47* |

*Note.* *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$

The independent t-test results (Table 1) indicate significant gender differences in several areas of social competencies. Female students scored significantly higher than males in self-responsibility skills ($p < .05$), social relationship skills ($p < .05$), teamwork-building skills ($p < .01$), and communication skills ($p < .05$). However, no significant gender differences were found in self-awareness or social networking skills. Overall, the findings suggest that female students tend to employ interpersonal and collaborative strategies more frequently than male students.

## Latvia

### Descriptive and conclusive statistical analysis

Maximum mean value of strategy use is 4.47, minimum – 2.54, the distribution of other values is shown in Figure 1.

S_vid is over 4.0 for the following statements – *I can work well with fellow students and teams, I am happy and appreciative of others' successes, I think that helping each other is beneficial to society, I can create positive interactions with the people I work with, I am someone who values time, I believe that honesty is the foundation of trust, If I want something, I have to work hard to get it, I am responsible for everything that comes from my actions, I am mindful of my behaviour from start to finish.*

S_vid is less than 3.10 for such items as *I like to use social media to join social gatherings, I can act as a mediator in conflict situations,* and *I decide to do things immediately.*

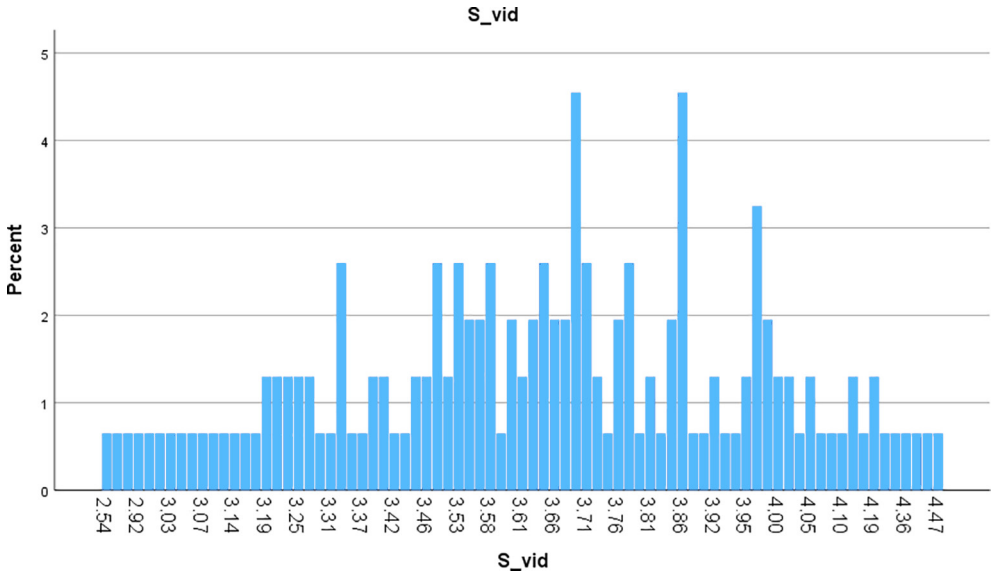


***Figure 1*** Mean values of strategy use

### Conclusive statistics

Mann-Whitney test was employed to find differences in strategy use between genders. Small ($z$ = 0.51) not statistically significant difference was found between males and female mean values of strategy use, females tended to use them more. The test revealed also small differences in strategy use from one study year to another. Year 2 students (61) have higher use of social strategies than Year 1 students (19). The difference is small $z$ = –1.56, and year 4 students (48) have higher use of social strategies than Year 1 students (19). The difference is small $z$ = –1.00, both differences are not statistically significant. The same test proved that full-time students (95) have higher use of social strategies than part-time students (54), the difference being small ($z$ = –0.63) and not statistically significant. Moreover, there were no differences in social strategy use among sports industry qualifications.

## Factor analysis

To identify the most essential factors, confirmatory factor analysis with Principal Component Analysis as an extraction factor was carried out. Using Kaiser's criterion, factors with an eigenvalue of 2.00 were retained. Scree plot was also used to find change in line direction. These considerations yielded six factors.

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) index, measuring the sampling adequacy, was 0.90, and Bartlett's test of sphericity, examining whether the correlation matrix was an identity matrix and statistically significant, it was = 0.00, i.e. < 0.05. These statistical values supported the use of CFA in this study (Hair et al., 2010).

Initial eigenvalues of six factors were higher than 2. Both Oblimin and Varimax rotations were carried out, reported Varimax rotation was reported. Varimax rotation explained 40.50 of variation. Scree Plot showed a more pronounced drop at the 6th factor.

The 1st factor was labelled Self-responsibility skills. To it belonged, among others, such factors as *I often learn about myself in order to co-create the world,* and *I analyze possible solutions and quickly break them down to the most suitable one* with loadings > 0.4.

The 2nd factor was named Social-relationship skills. To it belonged, for example, such statements – *I believe that honesty is the foundation of trust,* and *I listen and ask to understand others' advice and suggestions* with loadings > 0.4.

The 3rd factor was Teamwork building skills. With loadings > 0.4, there were such statements as – *I can work well with fellow students and teams*, *I can work well in a team*, *both on and off campus,* and *I am happy and appreciative of others' successes.*

The 4th factor was Social networking skills, including such items as *I can use social media to get along with people more easily, I can use social media sites to become more sociable*, *I can use social media to stay informed about current events in society, I can use social media to strengthen relationships between people, I can use social media sites for strengthening interpersonal relationships,* and *I like to use social media to join social gatherings*, with loadings > 0.40.

The 5th factor was Self-awareness, incorporating inter alia the following items – *I feel confident in everything I do*, *I do everything I do with willingness,* with loadings > 0.40.

The 6th factor was Communication skills. It included, to mention just some, the following items – *My emotions are predictable,* and *I can speak, listen, read and write English clearly so that others can understand*, with loadings > 0.40.

A list of statements with loadings > 0.40 is the same in both countries. For example, in Social-relationship skills factor, both countries have included the statements *I believe that honesty is the foundation of trust,* and *I listen* and *ask to understand others' advice and suggestions*.

## Conclusions

The study highlights the need for higher education institutions to focus on developing soft skills to better meet the demands of the labour market, ultimately preparing students to thrive in a rapidly interconnected and complex environment.

The research focuses on social skills of students in Thai and Latvian HEIs, needed for future employment. In Thai research, six factors, characterizing social skills were selected: Self-responsibility skills, Social relationship skills, Self-awareness skills, Teamwork-building skills, Social networking, and Category of Communication. The fact that all of them have similar loadings means that they contribute significantly to the overall social skills construct, therefore, improvements in any of these areas can substantially boost an individual's social competence. The same factors were identified in Latvian research. A list of statements with loadings > 0.40, is the same in both countries.

The study presents the level of the development of social skills according to a self-reported SSUS questionnaire. The most highly developed individual social skills in Latvian context, among others, were – *I can work well with fellow students and teams, I am happy and appreciative of others' successes, I think that helping each other is beneficial to society, I can create positive interactions with the people I work with, I am someone who values time, I believe that honesty is the foundation of trust, If I want something, I have to work hard to get it, etc.*

Descriptive statistics showed that Thai female students have all the six social competencies/skills higher than male students with one exception – Thai male students are more skilled in social networking. However, this result is not statistically significant. In Latvian context, the Mann-Whitney test was employed to find differences in strategy use between genders. Small ($z = 0.51$) not statistically significant difference was found between males and female mean values of strategy use, as females tended to use them more. The test also revealed small differences in strategy use from one study year to another. Year 2 students (61) have higher use of social strategies than Year 1 students (19). The difference is small $z = -1.56$, and year 4 students (48) have higher use of social strategies than Year 1 students (19). The difference is small $z = -1.00$, so that both differences are not statistically significant. The same test proved that full-time students (95) have higher use of social strategies than part-time students (54), the difference being small ($z = -0.63$) and not statistically significant. No differences were found in social strategy use among sports industry qualifications.

The knowledge of strong and weak aspects of student soft skills could help study program developers and university teachers to rely on the already developed ones and clearly specify and urge efforts in enabling the student with the least developed ones to be valuable asset in labour market.

## Discussion

The exploratory factor analyses of university student social skills, elaborated in Thailand, had revealed six factors. Confirmatory factor analysis, carried out in Latvian context, revealed the same six most developed social skills, however their sequence was slightly different.

In Thai research, six factors, were: Self-responsibility skills (1), Social relationship skills (2), Self-awareness skills (3), Teamwork-building skills (4), Social networking (5), and Communication skills (6).

In Latvian research, the sequence of six factors in the order of the factor with the largest loading to the ones was: Self-responsibility skills (1), Social-relationship skills (2), Teamwork building skills (3), Social networking skills (4), Self-awareness, (5) Communication skills (6).

In the Thai context, self-awareness is more developed than in Latvian a HEI (numbers 3 and 5). In Latvian context Teamwork-building skills are more developed than in a Thai HEI (numbers 3 and 4). In the Latvian context, social networking is more developed than in a Thai HEI (numbers 4 and 5).

However, Latvian research showcased significantly fewer participants. Consequently, it can be predicted that exploratory factor analysis might yield less factors than six. Therefore, we can suggest in further investigations to apply exploratory factor analysis instead of the confirmatory one.

## Ethics statement

### Thailand

This research upholds the ethical standards governing human subjects, aligning with principles such as the Declaration of Helsinki, the Belmont Report, the CIOMS Guideline, and the ICH GCP. Approval of conducting the study was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee of Suranaree University of Technology (No. EC-64-128). The participants were adequately informed about the study verbally before they provided their consent. The participants independently submitted their responses to questions that assessed their social competencies. The consent process was integrated at the beginning of the online survey, requiring the participants to explicitly agree before proceeding, thereby ensuring their voluntary engagement in the study.

### Latvia

Approval of the Ethics Committee of the Latvian Academy of Sport Education received on May 31, 2024, Atz. Nr. 8, Prot. Nr. 9. The study was conducted following the legal regulations on upholding ethical standards in scientific research.

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