



SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT TO ADVANCE STUDENT-CENTERED HIGHER EDUCATION

USAID/DEVELOPMENT, DEMOCRACY, AND INNOVATION
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The goal of this paper is to examine how soft skills development for higher education has been discussed in academic literature, USAID evidence, and programmatic examples, with particular attention to student well-being. Recognizing that overall student well-being is important to retention, sense of belonging, and development of soft skills, it is an important area of further exploration and requires continued investment and evidence. In addition to an examination of existing evidence and programmatic examples, the paper provides recommendations for faculty and pedagogy development, institutional shifts needed to advance student-centered higher education, and further research. This paper supports [USAID's Higher Education Learning Agenda](#), which identifies key learning questions to advance the higher education evidence base.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

RATIONALE FOR THIS PRODUCT

The purpose of this paper is to advance soft skills development for higher education students by adding to the body of USAID evidence that focuses on recommendations for designing and implementing **student-centered** soft skills development in higher education programming. This paper examines current research and programmatic examples that provide social-emotional support for higher education students. While there is substantial research and programmatic examples that highlight higher education (HEI) programs that support pre-service teachers implementing social-emotional learning (SEL) in classrooms, there is less research about how higher education institutions engage SEL for higher education students more broadly. (See text box 1) Additionally, much of the research and programmatic examples that discuss SEL at the higher education level tie soft skills to employability. (See text box 2) This paper notes what current higher education institution programs promote student well-being, outside of employability. It is important to note that many of the existing employability programs lead to increased mindfulness and increased self-esteem. However, higher education programs that focus on student well-being that are not employability programs are worthy of further exploration. Often, what is deemed employable or professional is based on dominant norms and values of acceptability, rooted in Eurocentric, patriarchal ways of existing (Simmons 2021). This paper will also provide recommendations for future areas where work is needed at the intersection of soft skills and higher education programming.

This paper was developed as the result of a series of consultations with USAID higher education staff and the SEL Working Group, as well as review of relevant policy and program documents and identification of activities that focus on higher education and soft skills. This paper reflects best practices and evidence from empirical research and examples from USAID and non-USAID higher education programming. This paper adds to USAID's higher education work and commitments to soft skills development. This paper does not cover soft skills in teacher preparation programs at the higher education level. To explore that topic further, view the [SEL Learning Brief](#).

Text box 1. As defined by the [2018 USAID Education Policy](#), a higher education institution is an organization that provides educational opportunities that build on secondary education, by providing learning activities in specialized fields with more complexity and depth. Higher/tertiary education also includes advanced vocational or professional education. This may include public or private universities, colleges, community colleges, academically affiliated research institutes, and training institutes, including teacher-training institutes.

Text box 2. The 2018 USAID Education Policy provides this definition: “**Social and emotional skills** are “a set of cognitive, social, and emotional competencies that children, youth, and adults learn through explicit, active, focused, sequenced instruction that allows them to understand and manage their emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.” Within USAID, the term social and emotional skills are considered interchangeable with “social-emotional learning” (SEL) within formal and non-formal education environments, while **soft skills** are the term used when referring to youth workforce development and higher education. Specific soft skills noted by USAID include higher-order thinking, communication skills, positive self-concept, social skills, and self-control. For more examples of the connection between soft skills and employability, see [Workforce Connections: Key “Soft Skills” that Foster Youth Workforce Success: Toward a Consensus Across Fields.](#)

The paper addresses the following questions:

1. What current evidence exists on student-centered higher education soft skills practices?
2. What promising practices, programs, or activities already exist that incorporate soft skills development in higher education?
3. How do we advance soft skills development outside of HEI employability programs for holistic student development?

SOFT SKILLS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher education institutions are uniquely positioned to advance social and emotional skill-building because of their reach across sectors, communities, and systems, as outlined in USAID’s [Higher Education Program Framework](#). In particular, higher education institutions have the capacity to conduct research about soft skills, deliver quality and student-centered education, and engage local communities in defining soft skills and well-being. Higher education institutions often develop frameworks and conduct research on frameworks, so they can play a role in including communities and students in contextualizing soft skills and student-centered education.

Higher education institutions are also places where continuing to build and practice soft skills is crucial for students. While SEL in basic education programming has been widely theorized, soft skills in higher education have not been as structured or organized as theories that were conceptualized for and studied about younger learners. Soft skills development in higher education is worthy of further exploration and provides great opportunity, because in these spaces, students shift and adapt to new and diverse communities outside of their families and home communities. Research in higher education populations demonstrates that social and emotional learning is associated with positive academic outcomes, retention, and sense of belonging, as well as overall well-being (Conley 2015). Students must navigate an extended ecosystem of peers, faculty members, and administrators, while balancing learning curricular content that involves critical thinking and problem-solving (Conley 2015). Through involvement in extracurricular activities such as sports, clubs, student government, and other leadership opportunities, students can deepen their teamwork skills, learn to understand nuanced complex social dynamics through social awareness, and become more solidified in their own self-identity as they explore their interests and passions.

WHAT ARE SOFT SKILLS IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT?

Higher education institutions must be viewed from a student-centered approach, particularly building soft skills to ensure that students have spaces to understand who they are and construct their identities. Student-centered learning recognizes that students’ “cognitive and affective learning experiences should guide all decisions as to what is done and how” in the classroom (Wright 2011). In other words, students’ perspectives and input guide curricular content, pedagogy, and application of concepts. This also means that students have the opportunity to explore and examine their beliefs and opinions, while deepening their understanding of self through self-reflection practices. As identified in the [2018 USAID Education Policy, positive youth development](#) should be employed in higher education settings to build on students’ strengths by creating opportunities for prosocial engagement in safe environments. Positive youth development provides a helpful framework that can be employed in higher education classrooms and campuses to build on student-centered approaches and practices.

Students’ overall wellness in higher education is linked to improved retention (Conley 2015). When students feel emotionally connected to higher education institutions and feel supported, they are more likely to overcome the challenges of adapting to a new environment with added stressors. Studies show that social-emotional engagement in higher education builds on teacher-student relationships (Reicher 2010). Students feel more encouraged in their learning process because they can provide input and bring in their own perspectives to the content and pedagogy. While the long-term goal of employability upon degree completion is important, it should not be the sole goal of soft skills development. It is necessary to create conditions and an atmosphere where students feel as though they can grow, develop, and explore their skills and talents *during* their higher education experience as well. Student success is not solely about completing a degree or obtaining a job. Success is also about ensuring that the student is at the center of their educational experience through a holistic approach. Student success may look different across contexts and varying student populations. While there is no standard definition of student success, the Higher Learning Commission’s Student Success Data Project says that student success is about transforming institutions to ensure that students are supported in their development.

HOW HAVE SOFT SKILLS BEEN DISCUSSED IN HIGHER EDUCATION?

MENTAL HEALTH

In higher education literature and programming, soft skills are often framed as being aligned with emotional intelligence, mental health, and psychosocial support. According to the [Inter-agency Standing Committee on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support](#), “mental health and psychosocial support describes any type of local or outside support that aims to protect or promote psychosocial wellbeing and/or prevent or treat mental disorder.” Psychosocial support services (PSS) include the [processes and actions that promote holistic well-being](#) of individuals within their social ecosystems, including relationships with families and communities.

An important distinction between soft skills interventions and psychosocial support is that soft skills are not clinical or specialized mental health services and should not be regarded as such. Students should be referred to the appropriate mental health services to receive clinical support. Soft skills can strengthen

and enhance students' abilities to manage stress and navigate challenging situations, but it cannot be substituted for clinical mental health support.

In higher education settings, students must adapt to new environments, learn new skills, meet and join new peer groups, and for some, live away from home or their families for the first time. Students with strong social and emotional skills, such as self and social awareness, transition more successfully to higher education environments (Ramos-Sanches 2007). However, poor self-awareness and challenges with recognizing and expressing emotions have shown to lead to emotional distress (Bayram 2008). Emotional distress is one of the most frequent adjustment challenges for higher education students (American College Health Association 2011). As noted above, while soft skills development is not mental health support, it can provide tools and strategies for students to recognize and name emotions, and increase emotional health. Recognizing that emotional distress is one of the most common adjustment challenges for higher education students, further exploration of best practices to support students in their transition to higher education is imperative.

One of the ways that higher education institutions have been providing social and emotional support for students is through student wellness efforts, also known as wrap-around support or pastoral care. There are many factors that affect students in addition to academics and on-campus commitments. Students may have caregiving responsibilities, disabilities, family relationships, and identities that influence and shape how they interact with higher education spaces. Additionally, many students continue to develop their political, social, and cultural identities in higher education settings. Students are at a [developmental stage](#) where they are defining a personal sense of identity and adopting a personal value system that may be affected by a new environment and the diverse perspectives of their peers and faculty members.

In addition to offering counseling services on campus, some institutions have offices dedicated to student affairs as another layer of support. While this is a widely theorized field in the United States, student affairs look different in varying contexts. For example, in Ghana, faculty members are appointed by Vice Chancellors to serve as Deans of Students, and often maintain their teaching appointments while serving students in this role. Deans of Students' offices are often under-resourced to provide a wide range of career services, counseling, spirituality, religion, and crisis response, in addition to Deans managing teaching, administration, and other commitments (Boakye-Yiadom 2015). The student wellness work often falls under the Dean of Students, which in some cases poses a challenge because Dean of Students offices are often associated with discipline. In a study conducted about the differences and similarities between how Deans of Students perceived their role and how students perceived their roles, Deans of Students considered their work to be *in loco parentis* or "in place of parents," while students perceived the role as more disciplinary than supportive (Boakye-Yiadom 2012). Because of this, students were less likely to go to the Dean of Students for well-being purposes. When designing and implementing student support services, there must be resources for staff to dedicate to student social and emotional wellness, and those services should be separate from disciplinary offices.

When there are staff dedicated to student affairs, students may not be aware that there are staff outside of faculty members or seek to engage with student affairs programming. For example, staff in the Gulf Cooperation Council states of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates noted that because so much of the academic culture of primary and secondary education is about academic achievement, many students and families have the mindset that higher education is only about earning a degree, so they may not engage in student wellness initiatives (Kruse 2017). Another challenge is that many student affairs theoretical frameworks were created and implemented in U.S. contexts and are not generalizable to students in other contexts. Particularly, many of the student affairs

theories and the most widely theorized social-emotional development theories emphasize individualistic cultural values, rather than collectivist cultural values. These are important considerations and further emphasize the need to contextualize student-centered experiences in higher education that fully capture the complexities and nuances of students' backgrounds and needs.

MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness is a promising tool that has [been cited in research on soft skills and higher education](#) as a mechanism for higher education students to manage stress and anxiety. As an example, a study showed that a five-minute instructor-guided mindfulness practice at the beginning and end of classes over the duration of eight weeks led to students feeling more calm and less anxious (Schwind 2017). [Mindfulness](#) is a practice in which an individual is aware of their thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations in the present moment. In being aware in present situations without judgment of feelings, it helps individuals become more self-aware and further develop skills like empathy and listening skills. By having more compassion for oneself, individuals can become more compassionate with others, a key to relationship building. In some cases, [what has made mindfulness a successful tool](#) is that students can practice mindfulness in multiple aspects of their daily lives, such as engaging in mindful conversations, eating mindfully, or using mindfulness as a tool for stress relief. This practice is also a no-cost strategy that can be implemented in classrooms and other activities during on-campus experiences.

FACULTY AND PEDAGOGY

In teaching and learning at the higher education level, most soft skills are not considered in the construction of curricula in favor of field-specific content. However, research shows that it is important to interweave soft skills into already existing content (Hagmann 2003). For example, [Makerere University Agricultural Research Institute Kabanyolo](#) in Uganda integrates soft skills development into coursework by creating a culture of giving and receiving feedback among peers and with the instructor. Being able to give and receive verbal feedback built students' self-awareness and social awareness skills, which then translated into other areas of their lives, including their personal relationships. Students named giving and receiving feedback, particularly in expressing appreciation, as a vital component of their own growth and development, and it helped them enrich their relationships with others. As part of this program, students were also given opportunities to co-design lectures and take the lead by sharing course content from their own perspectives (Hagmann 2003). There are also some examples of courses that directly work to build soft skills. For instance, at Hong Kong Polytechnic University, there is a credit-bearing course entitled "Tomorrow's Leaders," which focuses on positive youth development. In this course, students explored the intra and interpersonal qualities of effective leaders, while also practicing self-reflection about their own leadership (Shek 2012).

Literature also shows that higher education faculty often use teacher-centered modes of instruction, such as lecturing, that are informed by a Eurocentric approach to education (Pascarella 2005). A growing body of research has explored the importance of participatory methods of teaching and learning, where students have hands-on opportunities to try out skills in real-life settings and to engage in assignments that encourage them to think critically and creatively. Research suggests that active learning through role play, discussion, and making direct ties between the curriculum and real-world challenges can lead to deeper learning (Bell 2010, Chin 2019, Rao 2012).

Since higher education institutions are also uniquely positioned to engage with local communities, fieldwork with communities close to the educational environment has also proven to be a curricular

opportunity for students to build social awareness through gaining an appreciation for diversity and engaging in perspective-taking (Guerra-Báez 2019). When doing fieldwork in communities that may be different from those students come from, engaging in ongoing self-reflection is an important aspect of programming. To avoid further perpetuating structures and systems that can be oppressive, fieldwork must encourage students to examine their identities, so they are building authentic relationships with the community they are working with. For example, the University of Maryland works in partnership with four universities in Ghana: Ashesi University, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, University of Cape Coast, and the University of Ghana. Students and faculty members that participated in a study abroad program to Ghana created a culturally conscious pedagogy model, which included reflection as a means of documenting growth and learning through daily written reflections and group debriefs (Martin 2021). As part of this pedagogical model, faculty members seek to decenter whiteness in assessment and pedagogy by not only introducing participants to Ghanaian history and culture, but also the systems and ways of knowing within the culture. Students and faculty members in the United States and Ghana engage in a series of collaborative meetings virtually and in-person to identify cross-cultural connections for building and sustaining higher education student affairs programs that serve students' emotional and well-being needs.

PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING/CHALLENGE-BASED LEARNING

Education scholar Linda Darling-Hammond stated, “we are currently preparing students for jobs that do not yet exist, to use technologies that have not yet been invented, and to solve problems that we don't even know are problems yet” (Darling-Hammond 2015). While technology evolves and society adapts, students will be the ones to create human-centered and community-led solutions. One of the most widely referenced pedagogical strategies that increases soft skills named in academic literature is problem-based learning. Problem-based learning originated in medical programs. After realizing that lectures did not work to adequately prepare students to enter the medical field, medical programs adapted to use more student-centered approaches, such as internships and hands-on problem-solving. [Problem-based learning](#) encourages learners to conduct research, test out possible solutions to problems, and iterate collaboratively with others, building on both cooperation skills and analytical thinking skills (Savery 2015). The problems that learners often tackle are interdisciplinary. Engaging with interdisciplinary problems encourages students to take on new perspectives and gain appreciation for collaborative efforts that involve multiple forms of expertise and experience. An essential part of social-emotional wellness is relationship building and collaboration, for which problem-based learning can offer a foundation.

One key component of problem-based learning is the support of a coach, mentor, or instructor who guides reflection and debriefing, so students have opportunities to process through both the experience and their approach to problem-solving to build self-awareness. Similar to the [tenets of Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)](#), problem-based learning must be adapted to the students' skills, abilities, and interests. While there is still a lack of assessments for higher-order skills such as critical thinking, analyses that examine the application of knowledge support problem-based learning as a pedagogical strategy (Hoidn 2014). As an example, the USAID Lower Mekong Initiative Connecting the Mekong through Education and Training project created “innovation challenges,” where students identified and solved problems in their communities or global issues.

Different from problem-based learning, design-based learning requires that the student or problem solver garner community feedback and collaboration in designing a solution that addresses a challenge. Working with the community makes design thinking a highly contextual process and builds on key soft skills such as relationship building, social awareness, and teamwork. There are [six phases of design-based thinking](#): research the question, define the core problem, generate ideas, design prototypes, test prototypes, research, and improve. Each phase builds on the next and being successful in the design process requires flexibility and persistence. Many higher education institutions are using design thinking to develop students' critical thinking skills, creativity, and cultural and global awareness, while simultaneously providing opportunities for students to pose new visions for some of the world's most pressing problems. This exemplifies what soft skills look like in practice—having a knowledge of self to build relationships with others to work collaboratively to create a more just and equitable world.

There are a number of examples of programs that currently exist that incorporate design thinking in higher education programming. In Lebanon, the [Higher Education Capacity Development](#) activity addresses capacity building of higher education institutions to improve design thinking, problem-based learning, and employability programming through soft skills, among other interventions.

In Vietnam, the [Building University-Industry Learning and Development through Innovation and Technology \(BUILD-IT\)](#) activity implemented a project-based curriculum, which includes team-based problem-solving. Students from six universities [designed a prototype](#) to address a social issue, which they presented at a final showcase, hosted by USAID BUILT-IT and the Dow Vietnam STEM program. Some of the students created designs such as a smart wheelchair, puncture-proof clothing, and solar dryer technology, all aimed at posing a solution to a global challenge. As part of the curriculum, students also received funding to finance the development of their prototypes, faculty support, and mentorship from industry leaders. Innovative curricula like this provide students with hands-on learning to work together, identify social issues, and offer solutions based on their unique talents and strengths to create an impact that will positively affect others.

PEER SUPPORT AND EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

In higher education settings, students may lean on peer support more often than family because they've moved away from home. Students who receive support from peers adjust more easily emotionally into higher education settings (Abbey 1985). Particularly, having a strong sense of social support during the first two semesters improves social and emotional adjustment (Friedlander 2007). Extracurricular activities and service opportunities provide spaces for students to interact and connect, while also strengthening social skills such as teamwork. Student participation in service activities on campus or in the community have had a positive impact on both their personal development and academic achievement (Persell 2004). In the literature and programmatic examples, student organizations and volunteering and community service initiatives outside of the classroom played a role in both the advancement of peer relationships and student self-awareness.

As one example, the Center for Educational Research and Development at Universidad Alberto Hurtado in Santiago, Chile, uses workshops and training programs that promote collaboration and teamwork, such as artistic or recreational activities outside of the traditional classroom space. In another example, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, students from eight public universities in Senegal worked together through the organization [100,000 Students Against COVID-19](#) to engage in activities including community surveillance, raising awareness about the virus, and creating innovative solutions to

help stop the spread. As part of this work, the organization employed [positive youth development](#) to build on students' strengths and incorporate opportunities for students to develop self-esteem.

Additionally, one of the ways institutions have been creating structures and systems for student success is by not only providing financial assistance, but also by providing training, workshops, and service opportunities. USAID/Lebanon initiated the [Lebanon University Scholars Program](#) (USP) at Lebanese American University and Haigazian University and later added the American University of Beirut. The USP scholarship provides each student with full tuition and fees, a book allowance, a living stipend, a computer, and all other related education expenses. As part of the scholarship program, all students have to participate in community service work, attend leadership and career workshops, and complete internships to get hands-on opportunities to practice soft skills as a complement to their academic studies.

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

CAREER CENTERS

At many institutions, career centers house much of the programming related to building soft skills. While most career centers focus on soft skills development to increase employability, there are some examples of how career centers use principles of soft skills to enhance goal setting and identity development and provide activities for meaningful relationship building among staff and students. One successful strategy career services have employed to center student well-being is implementing guidance as a central component of their services. In the West Bank and Gaza, the USAID [Youth Entrepreneurship Development Program](#), which ran from 2011–2016, aimed to strengthen the capacity of career centers in universities to better prepare students for the workforce by including guidance and counseling as a core mission of their work. To further grow this work, they partnered career services initiatives with The Center of Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT), also funded by the West Bank and Gaza Palestinian Faculty Development Program, which was created to provide resources and build faculty capacity to deliver high-quality, effective instruction and research opportunities for their students. Together, career services and CELT, had an overall focus on aligning curriculum and pedagogy with additional opportunities for community-based learning and experiential learning. By building a direct link between academic and career services support, the partnership provides a positive example of how multiple departments at universities can collaborate to provide holistic support for students to engage in social and emotional development.

As part of the [Science, Technology, Research and Innovation for Development](#) (STRIDE) activity, U.S. career center experts from Florida State University and the William Davidson Institute at the University of Michigan, supported three Philippine universities in addressing social and emotional challenges by transforming the role of career centers from solely offering counseling and advising to implementing a holistic strategy that establishes meaningful connections between students' learning outcomes and the needs of industry across different aspects of university operations (STRIDE 2017). The USAID-developed career centers also emphasize building soft skills in students as part of their preparation for life after graduation. Directly aligned with the [principles of soft skills](#), the University of Science and Technology of Southern Philippines identified how its programs could develop each component of soft skills:

- **Self-management: self-discipline, stress management.** The office is in constant coordination with the Guidance Unit in Career Advising in the exploration of the students' career goals and in making career decisions.
- **Self-awareness: self-confidence, self-efficacy, identifying emotions.** Conduct of Career Assessments and The Competency-Based College Readiness and Career Success Bridge Program helps students increase their intrapersonal skills.
- **Relationship skills: communication, teamwork.** The career center held the Online World of Work 101: a Lecture Series for employer partners to give inspiration and amplify learning experiences about the world of work and career pathways.
- **Higher-order thinking skills: problem-solving, critical thinking, decision-making.** The career center offers the Career Development and Planning program for advising and career assistance to students to take an active role in their decision-making and critical thinking in their career goals.
- **Communication skills:** The English for Academic and Specific Purposes program is offered to strengthen and polish students' industry-based communication skills by embedding language-heavy activities focused on listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Evidence shows that social and emotional skills development in education programs that are gender- and culture-sensitive can aid in reducing social and academic disparities (Jagers 2018). As the [USAID Education Policy](#) states, equity and inclusion must be central when including social and emotional skills development in education systems, in this case higher education, especially for the most marginalized learners. For SEL to happen, environments must be safe and supportive for students, especially students who have been historically oppressed.

Marginalized and vulnerable populations often face barriers when it comes to attending and completing higher education studies because of numerous factors that influence access and connections to ongoing institutional support. For marginalized and vulnerable populations, including young women, students with disabilities, refugees, and low-income learners, social and emotional skills development programming should center their experiences and their needs. Learners may face marginalization at the intersection of multiple historically oppressed identities. Programs should be gender- and conflict-sensitive, culturally responsive, and use [UDL to create more equitable learning environments](#) for all students.

Some of the barriers marginalized and vulnerable students may face are often related to finances (e.g., tuition, room and board, visa and transportation fees, other emergencies), lack of gender- and conflict-sensitive programming and opportunities, and language barriers. For refugees in particular, there are barriers related to not having access to previous school records from having to flee from conflict. Refugee students may not have residency papers to meet residency requirements. In addition to creating institutional shifts and policy changes that support refugee students' ability to attend higher education institutions, there have also been some promising programmatic efforts that support refugee students' access to and success in higher education from a holistic approach. [Mosaik Education](#) in Jordan used participatory design to identify psychosocial challenges in higher education for refugee students (Abu-Amsha 2019). Program leaders co-designed workshops with youth that help refugee students understand different higher education opportunities that are available, including supporting students

through crafting scholarship applications and offering detailed information about potential fields of study students might be interested in.

In addition to institutional programmatic efforts, there are initiatives to connect refugee students directly with resources. The [Institute of International Education's Platform for Education in Emergencies Response](#) (IIE PEER) is an online platform with resources in both English and Arabic on which displaced students can find scholarships, language learning opportunities, online courses, and other resources. IIE PEER also offers travel grants of up to \$2,000 to Syrian students who need financial assistance to travel to their institution. Online resources such as this one can also serve as critical sites to connect students to social and emotional resources, such as counseling, workshops, and information about stress-relieving activities and practices.

For women, barriers to access and success in higher education are further exacerbated by sexism and patriarchy. A [report by UNICEF](#) outlined how barriers for women are related to household and community-level barriers, school-level barriers, and policy and systems-level barriers. The need for shifts and changes at all levels is crucial to ensure physical, emotional, psychological, and intellectual safety for women seeking access to and in higher education institutions. At the school level, some promising programs have both operationalized and utilized gender-sensitive curricula and pedagogy. A case study conducted by the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies in Guinea and Sierra Leone saw success when there were women class assistants that acted as a liaison between students and faculty, participated in the grading process, and offered counsel to women students (Bott 2005). This model was helpful because it provided women students with direct social and emotional support and disrupted student-teacher hierarchies that are often based in power imbalances that can be further heightened with gender. Another example of how mentoring played a pivotal role in women students' social and emotional development is a [gender-sensitive Master's program](#) at the University of Rwanda. This partnership between Michigan State University, Washington State University, and the University of Rwanda sought to create a classroom environment and an institutional culture that would appreciate the expertise of women in Rwanda's agriculture sector. In addition to women receiving mentorship through the program, faculty members also went through a training to gender sensitize curricular design and classroom practice. In both of the examples provided, mentorship, classroom, and institutional shifts were central themes in creating more equitable and supportive learning environments for women.

To ensure that soft skills and education overall is more equitable for all students, UDL should be at the center of soft skills programming in higher education. Aligning UDL and soft skills will ensure that learning and support are tailored to each individual student and their varying needs. In Egypt, through the U.S.-Egypt Higher Education Initiative Public University Scholarships Program, [scholarship recipients receive](#) career counseling to ensure success in their fields of study. Students also receive English language training, access to internship opportunities, opportunities to participate in community service projects, and the option to participate in study abroad programs in the United States. The initiative also established [disability services centers](#) that advocate for equal access to higher education for students with disabilities, provide new practices and support existing practices to remove social barriers, and provide training and social activities that support the inclusion of students with disabilities. Using [UDL as a framework](#) to ensure inclusive learning for all students can provide meaningful and challenging learning opportunities that also build on key social and emotional skills.

MEASUREMENT AND ASSESSMENT

Currently, there are a number of instruments that measure soft skills in varying contexts, and the number continues to grow. Measurement tools may be used as formative assessments, to inform implementation, to be descriptive, or to be evaluative (Galloway 2017). The most supported skills in the literature include positive self-concept, higher order thinking skills, and understanding emotions and responses to emotions. Many of the existing tools assess communication and responsibility. Many of the existing tools are self-reports or observations made by others. As such, some of the challenges associated with measurement of soft skills include reliably assessing change in skills over time, bias that is often associated with self-report data, and contextualizing tools to meet the needs and experiences of varying individuals in diverse populations. Higher education institutions are uniquely positioned to work in partnership with local communities to determine how existing tools could be contextualized and adapted and to create and test the validity and reliability of new measures that are community-centered and culturally relevant. Also, language in the measures may not translate accurately, leading to skewed results. As noted in the [SEL in Basic Education How-to Note](#), assessments or tools should reflect the cultural and social context. Further, many tools are not created with input from the populations they study, leading to bias and assumptions about what constitutes the development of skills, such as self-concept. For more on measurement development in soft skills, see [Measuring Soft Skills & Life Skills in International Youth Development Programs: A Review and Inventory of Tools](#).

Additionally, because soft skills and the development of soft skills are highly personal experiences, they can shift based on outside factors that affect an individual while completing a survey or being observed. They can also be affected by cultural and social experiences and structural and systemic oppression. For example, sexism may contribute to how an individual views themselves and may influence how they see their relationships to others. When tools are validated using one group as the norm, it can yield deficit-based results about marginalized and oppressed groups. Qualitative measures, such as youth participatory action research, interviewing, and arts-based methodologies, can be used to provide further nuance and depth to how individuals are making sense of their soft skills development processes. Qualitative measures may also illuminate areas where quantitative measures may be limited in understanding how sociopolitical factors affect soft skills development. Mixed methods can be helpful in not only measuring soft skills development, but further understanding how the skills are understood and practiced in different contexts.

Below is a table that lists some example measures that examine individual soft skills and overall well-being that could be used in the assessment of existing programs and how they may or may not affect student well-being.

Exhibit 1. Measures that examine soft skills and overall well-being

TOOLS/ INSTRUMENTS (SEE TEXT BOX 3)	TYPE OF TOOL	DESCRIPTION	AGE RANGE FOR WHICH TOOL IS VALIDATED	EVIDENCE OF RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY	EVIDENCE OF SENSITIVITY TO CHANGE OVER TIME	SOURCES
Perceived Stress Scale	Self-report	This scale is one of the most widely used psychological instruments that assesses how individuals perceive their own levels of stress. The 10-question survey asks prompts on a Likert scale from 0 (<i>never</i>) to 4 (<i>very often</i>). Some example prompts include: in the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems? In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?				Cohen et al., 1983
New General Self-Efficacy Scale	Self-report	This instrument is an 8-item measure that assesses how much individuals believe they can achieve their goals, despite difficulties. It uses a 5-point rating scale with 1 - strongly disagree and 5 - strongly agree. Examples of the questions include: When facing difficult tasks, I am certain that I will accomplish them. I will be able to successfully overcome many challenges.	12+	Studies in two countries found that the New General Self-Efficacy scale has higher construct validity than the previous General Self-efficacy scale (Chen 2001).		Chen, G., Gully, S. M., & Eden, D., 2001
Need to Belong Scale		This instrument assesses the desire an individual feels to belong and be accepted by others. This is a 10-item scale that uses a Likert scale from 1- strongly disagree to 5 - strongly agree. Some of the questions include: if other people don't seem to accept me, I don't let it bother me. I seldom worry about whether other people care about me.		The Need to Belong scale has evidence of content validity and construct validity. It also shows reliability indicators (Leibovich 2018).		Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, & Schreindorfer, 2005

TOOLS/ INSTRUMENTS (SEE TEXT BOX 3)	TYPE OF TOOL	DESCRIPTION	AGE RANGE FOR WHICH TOOL IS VALIDATED	EVIDENCE OF RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY	EVIDENCE OF SENSITIVITY TO CHANGE OVER TIME	SOURCES
YF's Life Skills Survey Tool	Youth self-report survey	Participants rate their degree of agreement with statements such as: "I react positively to suggestions from others on how I might improve myself" and "I am comfortable taking risks when trying to solve a problem."	16–24	All domains demonstrated high reliability (>0.80) and inter item correlations (corr > 0.30). Domain scores were valid. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) models fit the four specified domains as factors.		
World Learning's WorkLinks Skills and Values Assessment (WLSVA)	Self-administered online (auto scoring) or paper-based	This tool includes 56 core questions which are divided into three subscales: soft skills, earning skills, and civic values. Some of these measure goal setting and planning, understanding emotions, social inclusion and justice, and community and civic engagement.	18–29	The assessment has high internal reliabilities (0.79-0.94) and positive correlation with employment and stress management.	The assessment has high test-retest reliabilities and smallest real difference of 3.8%-5.5% for subscales.	Available under CC BY-NC-SA from https://www.worldlearning.org/what-we-do/wlsva-toolkit/
Responses to Stress Questionnaire (RSQ)	Self-report for children, youth, and adults, as well as observation reports from others (e.g., program leader, administrator)	This questionnaire measures coping and involuntary stress responses. The tool begins with a checklist of stressors and the individual filling out the questionnaire is asked to keep those stressors in mind while filling out the remainder of the survey. Individuals rate how often they use each coping mechanism on a scale of 1 (none) to 4 (a lot). Some questions invite a written response about how the individual uses those coping mechanisms.	9+	In a study conducted about the reliability and validity of RSQ when adapted to a Chinese context, the RSQ-C showed moderate internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha was 0.87) and test-retest reliability (Xiao 2010).		Connor-Smith et al., 2000
Knack - Measuring Soft Skills Among Youth and Young Adults: Validation of a New Instrument	Game application (non-self-rating system)	Knack measures soft skills including positive self-concept, positive attitude, social skills, and responsibility. Based on digital skill badges individuals learn, they are also connected to opportunities.	17+	The app has been tested on validity and reliability.		Measuring Soft Skills Among Youth and Young Adults: Validation of a New Instrument

Text box 3. While these tools may be useful, this does not necessarily mean that USAID endorses these tools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

INSTITUTIONAL SHIFTS

1. To achieve student-centered institutions, there have to be shifts at the institutional and classroom levels. The higher education experience for students is one that is multi-faceted. Since students are engaging with faculty, peers, administration, staff, and communities, there are many levels in which students are engaging with higher education institutions. Rather than solely looking to one area (e.g., classroom pedagogy), how can shifts in multiple areas be made to ensure that every touchpoint a student has with a higher education institution supports their academic, social, and emotional well-being? Aligned with disability-inclusive education, there must be a shift in moving from regarding students as needing to change to instead placing the onus on institutions to provide the necessary support for students to thrive. What does holistic support look like?
2. Investments must be made in student-centered support services on campus, such as mental health services, that are not under the same departments as disciplinary offices. There is also great potential for career services to incorporate student social and emotional well-being initiatives when there are not financial resources for student well-being offices. What are spaces students can go to at their institutions to feel supported? What types of support do students need? How would they like to receive that support? In building a deeper evidence base, students can be surveyed or engage in participatory methods to determine what support is needed and share how they would envision that support.

CURRICULUM AND FACULTY TRAINING

3. Soft skills development must be integrated into an existing curriculum and faculty training. Faculty should be trained in soft skills development, particularly soft skills practices that are conflict- and gender-sensitive. Best practices, as outlined in this paper, include hands-on, interactive, and participatory pedagogical strategies. It is important to note that interactive pedagogies must also be contextualized. Interactive pedagogies may be new in certain cultural contexts and institutions, so it cannot be forced on students, but rather scaffolded over time by making pedagogy as contextual as possible. More evidence is needed in this area to provide empirical examples of how to turn theory into practice.

AREAS FOR ADDITIONAL RESEARCH

- Additional research is needed about soft skills development for higher education beyond employability. Research shows that emotional distress is common in higher education students, so identifying best practices is essential to creating and sustaining educational environments that promote well-being. Aligned with the recommendations in the [Higher Education Landscape Analysis](#), there must be meaningful mechanisms to collect data across operating units. Also, there are opportunities for USAID to further

deepen the evidence base on what good practices are in developing soft skills in higher education students. Because soft skills are highly contextual, USAID is uniquely positioned to resource and support programmatic efforts in various contexts that build an evidence base for what soft skills looks like in different institutions globally.

- Questions to ask in further research include: How are higher education institutions creating and studying programs centered on student wellness, outside of the United States context? How are higher education institutions operationalizing and understanding student-centered education? What are other best practices, outside of mindfulness, that increase student well-being? What case studies or programs incorporate wellness initiatives?
- Many of the examples shared in this paper have partnerships with U.S. institutions. A few of the programs used as examples explicitly stated that they modeled their programs after American-style education. As Priority 4 in the USAID Education Policy states, U.S. partners do not have to be the lead. Education-related social and emotional learning programs with the most empirical evidence about impact and implementation are designed for students in the United States. Using these programs in contexts where USAID invests requires more than just translating the language. Rather, the skills that students are developing have to be locally relevant, valued, and center locally-driven research.
- Some questions for further exploration include: What do soft skills in higher education look like from a local perspective? What does well-being look like from a local, cultural perspective? How do conceptualizations of student well-being align with cultural values?

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