GUIDE FOR THE INTEGRATION OF THE SOFT SKILLS IN VET

SOFT SKILLS FRAMEWORK FOR THE VOCATIONAL EDUCATION & TRAINING

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Contents

Introduction

This document was designed to support VET providers in defining a strategy to integrate the soft skills on VET curricula, guaranteeing:

- A common and clear understanding related to the concept and characteristics of soft skills;
- The match between the soft skills identified and companies' needs;
- The commitment and cooperation between VET system stakeholders in the process of identification, assessment and development/reinforcement of trainees' soft skills.

This document is the result of a study carried out by the consortium of VET_GPS project between October/2017 and June/2018, involving representatives from VET providers/professionals, companies and trainees from Portugal, Spain, Italy and Austria. From this study, resulted three deliverables to which this document reports to:

- *Development of a soft skills list* (available here)
- *National validation of VET_GPS soft skills list (available here)*
- *Soft skills framework (available here)*

The document is organised in four main sections as follows:

- *Soft Skills – The concept!* – In this section is introduced the concept and definition of *soft skills* and provided some examples of soft skills, namely the ones that will be focused in the project.
- *Soft Skills Framework* – Section in which is presented the framework used by the consortium to structure the soft skills to be approaches.
- *How to integrate Soft Skills on VET offer?* – Some principles to taking into consideration for the integration of soft skills on VET offer are mentioned in this section.
- *The VET_GPS methodology* – Final section, focused on the presentation of the VET_GPS products oriented to the integration of the soft skills in VET offer.

Soft Skills – The concept!

Identify a single definition and concept of **Soft Skills** seems to be a challenge!

Is common to find different theories and authors, who understand soft skills and there is no universally accepted definition. Even when considering the designation, there is no consensus and soft skills are often referred to as transversal skills or competences, key skills, core skills or life skills[1].

VET_GPS - Guiding tools for Professional Skills development in VET approach relies on the term **soft skills** as defined by the European Union:

> Skills that are cross-cutting across jobs (see Job-specific skills) and sectors (see Sector-specific jobs) and relate to personal competences (confidence, discipline, self-management) and social competences (teamwork, communication, emotional intelligence)

[2]

Overall, **Soft Skills** are understood as a set of critical competences, life-oriented and in strict relation with individuals. This means that soft skills differ from **Hard Skills**, commonly seen as "more technical, highly specific in nature and particular to an occupation, and that can be (generally) taught more easily than soft skills"[3].

Capacity building, learning to learn, persistence, resilience, creativity, self-discipline, self-reflectiveness and acting autonomously are some examples of soft skills. As with the designation and concept, there is no agreement on the list of more relevant soft skills, still there are different approaches providing different examples of soft skills. Due to this fact, partners from VET_GPS project proceed with a small study, involving representatives from VET organisations/professionals and business, for the identification of **six soft skills**, the basis of the project's outcomes (see Figure 1.):

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[1] Different approaches and definitions of Soft Skills can be found in the document "National validation of VET_GPS Soft skills list".
[2] Source: Skills Panorama Glossary, CEDEFOP, European Union, available here.
[3] Source: IBE (2013). Glossary of Curriculum Terminology, IBE- UNESCO, available here.

Problem solving & creativity

Ability to think and identify a solution to a complex situation and problem, using imagination or original ideas.

Readiness to learn & critical thinking

Readiness to learn is related to the availability of a person to seek and invest in learning and in behaviour change. Critical thinking is related to the ability of analysing situations and information and make a reasoned judgement about it.

Adaptability

Ability to change and to be able to adjust to new situations, conditions, and contexts, without compromising our beliefs, ideas and personality.

Self-motivation & positive attitude

Ability that drives a person to do things without the influence from other people, with a positive mental attitude that focuses on the bright side of life and a mindset that envisions favourable results.

Communication

Ability to interact with others in several contexts, to exchange information, ideas, knowledge, expertise, etc.

Teamwork

Cooperation between the members of a group of people to achieve a common goal.

Figure 1 -Identification and brief description of the six soft skills focused on the VET_GPS project.

Soft Skills Framework

In literature is possible to find many approaches to how soft skills can be defined and into which subcategories is possible to classify them. This was a challenge to the VET_GPS partnership as well: Which classification is aligned with the project's goals? Which classification will allow working with young trainees? These were the two starting questions to which the consortium had to answer to be able to design and develop the set of VET_GPS tools and materials.

As mentioned, soft skills include all the qualities, skills and qualifications that enable both professional and personal success in addition to hard skills. They relate to personal competences, social skills and methodological competences necessary at the workplace.

In VET_GPS project it was followed a **three levels approach of soft skills**, all connected with each other. The assignment of the individual soft skills to the three categories and even the establishment of the three categories are more of a methodological nature to provide advice and support for trainees than of a scientifically proved one. In literature and on the internet, there are many different and sometimes contradictory categories of soft skills We are aware, however, that the boundary between the different soft skills is anything but clear and that one could also assign certain soft skills logically justified to another category. From the pedagogical and advisory everyday life, however, this classification, especially when it comes to the advice and support of trainees, has proven very successful.
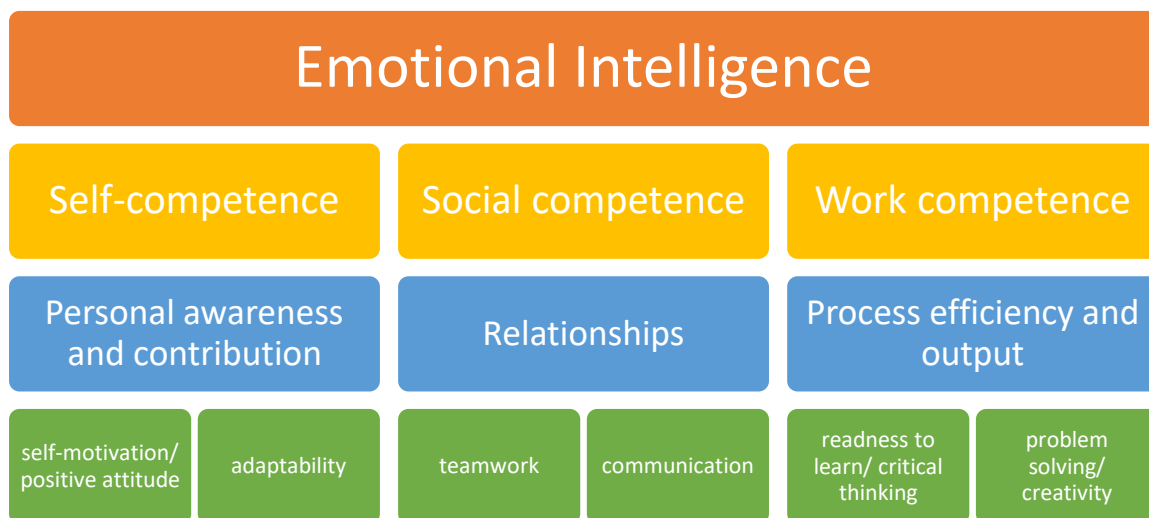
Figure 2 – The three-level approach of soft skills considered on the VET_GPS framework.

When it comes to soft skills, there is another factor that needs to be considered: Emotional Intelligence. It is both a part and a basic prerequisite for all soft skills. Emotional Intelligence determines how one can deal with one's own feelings and the emotions of others. The higher the Emotional Intelligence, the better the ability to perceive and manipulate one's own and other's sensations. By refining their existing soft skills, as well as learning and training new ones, they can increase their Emotional Intelligence. At the same time, the higher a person's emotional intelligence is, the more pronounced many soft skills will be.

Self-competence

Personal or self-competence relates to dealing with oneself. It deals with issues such as adaptability, self-motivation and self-awareness. But also, the knowledge of methods to motivate oneself and to maintain a positive attitude belongs to it. Soft skills, which can be assigned to personal competence, thus refer only to their own. However, they also influence the social environment.

Social competence

Social competence relates to dealing with other people. Interpersonal skills include ability to work in a team, empathy, and knowledge of human nature to communicate effectively and the ability to establish and maintain contacts. So social skills include all soft skills that affect interaction with other people. But without the proper personal skills, it will be hard to build social skills. So, for example, without self-esteem and inner strength in social situations, professional or private, you cannot behave confidently.

Work competence

The methodological competence needed at the workplace is about mastery and learning of certain methods and techniques. These include skilful handling of new media and presentation techniques, as well as the ability to tackle and solve problems in a structured way. Again, soft skills are required in terms of personal competence. Without self-discipline and motivation, it will be hard to stay on the ball and acquire appropriate knowledge. Social skills are also in demand here. The more empathy one has and the better she/he can communicate, the better problems can be solved.

Figure 3- Description of the three-levels of classification of the VET_GPS soft skills.

How to integrate Soft Skills on VET offer?

More than ever, companies recognise the relevance of the soft skills for the integration and success of young qualified workers in the labour market! VET providers and professionals are also aware of the need of promoting trainees' soft skills, as a success factor, not only for the integration in the labour market but also to succeed in VET path and qualification. Despite this awareness, there is a lack of know-how and expertise, from both parties, concerning the integration of the soft skills development in VET offer.

How can it be done?

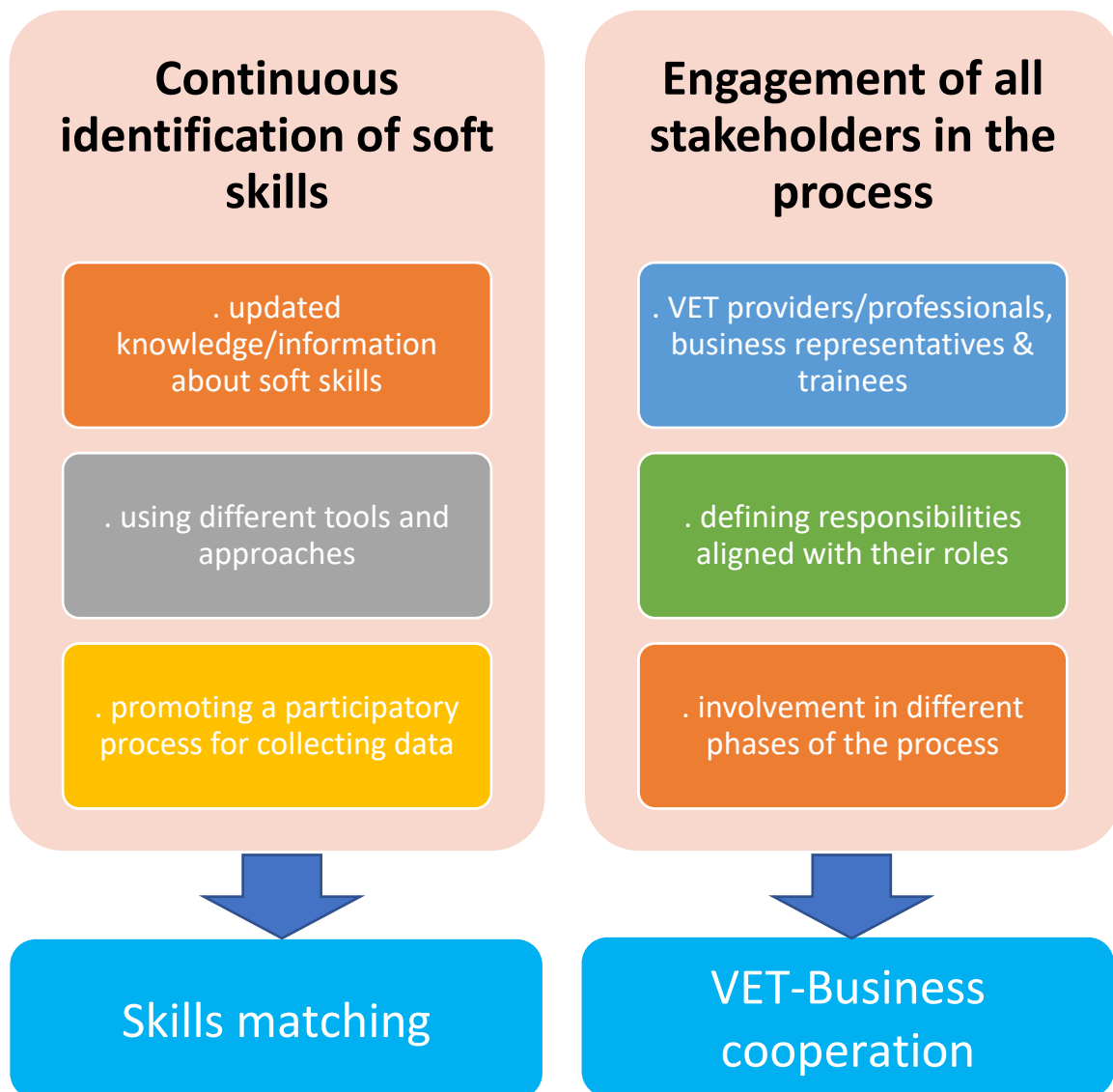To successfully integrate the soft skills on VET offer is important to assure the:

Continuous identification of soft skills	Engagement of all stakeholders in the process
. updated knowledge/information about soft skills	. VET providers/professionals, business representatives & trainees
. using different tools and approaches	. defining responsibilities aligned with their roles
. promoting a participatory process for collecting data	. involvement in different phases of the process
Skills matching	**VET-Business cooperation**

Figure 4 – The two pillars for the integration of the soft skills on VET offer.

Skills matching is one of the most critical aspects when planning and providing initial training to young people, aiming at preparing them for life and the labour market. In the past years, the mismatch between trainees' soft skills and the labour market needs, is being more and more referred by employers as a gap. This gap is documented in the "National validation of VET_GPS soft skills list"[4], a report on the findings of the study performed in the context of VET_GPS project.

The question is, how can VET providers and companies overcome this gap?

The answer is on the promotion of fruitful and relevant **VET-Business cooperation** based in three main principles:

- All stakeholders need to be actively involved and contribute to the results of the cooperation and partnership;
- The work and cooperation between all stakeholders need to be coordinated and managed effectively;
- Clear and understandable communication between all stakeholders is crucial for the results of the network.

Figure 5 – Examples of meetings between different stakeholders for the validation of the soft skills needs.

These are also the principles behind the VET_GPS methodology, designed to support VET providers and professionals and representatives from companies to successfully integrate the assessment and development of soft skills in VET training and internships.

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[4] Available here.

The VET_GPS methodology

The VET_GPS methodology is designed to assure that VET professionals (e.g. counsellors and trainers), trainees and representatives from companies are effectively involved in the process of assessment and/or development of trainees' soft skills.

In detail, partners from the VET_GPS project will design three major products, integrating different materials and tools, addressed to different stakeholders (see Figure 6.):
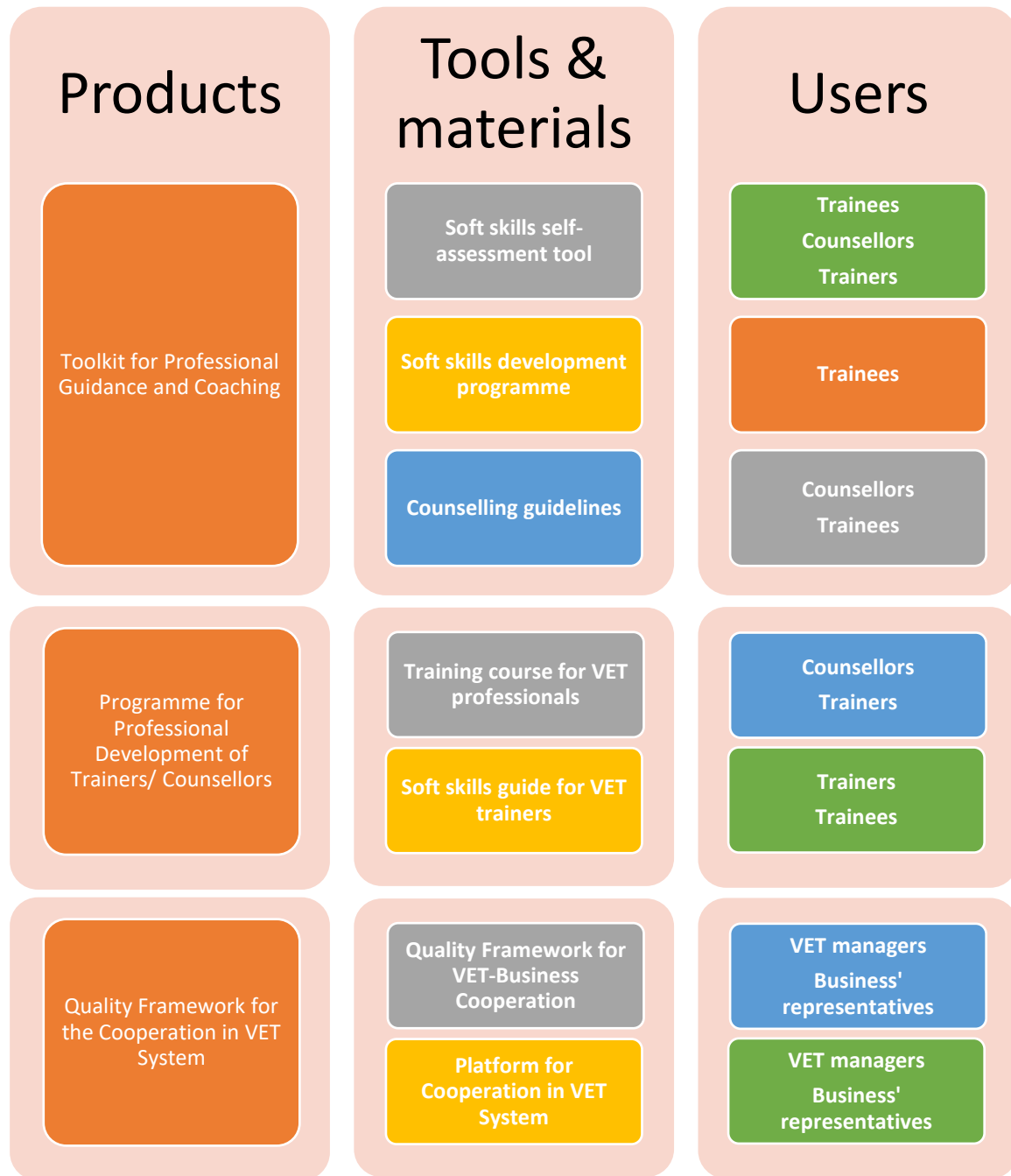
Products	Tools & materials	Users
Toolkit for Professional Guidance and Coaching	Soft skills self-assessment tool	Trainees Counsellors Trainers
	Soft skills development programme	Trainees
	Counselling guidelines	Counsellors Trainees
Programme for Professional Development of Trainers/ Counsellors	Training course for VET professionals	Counsellors Trainers
	Soft skills guide for VET trainers	Trainers Trainees
Quality Framework for the Cooperation in VET System	Quality Framework for VET-Business Cooperation	VET managers Business' representatives
	Platform for Cooperation in VET System	VET managers Business' representatives

Figure 6 – Identification of the products, tools & materials and end users of the VET_GPS project.

Guide for the integration of the soft skills in VET was designed by a set of *organisations* representing Vocational Education and Training (VET) providers and companies from Portugal, Spain, Italy, Austria and Brussels.

This document results from a set of research activities performed by the organisations in the different countries, to identify the soft skills to be approached in the project and the methodology behind the development of the project's products and tools.

Three other documents can be analysed, as a complement to this one, to have a better understanding about the research performed and the results achieved: *Development of a soft skills list* (available here); *National validation of VET_GPS soft skills list (available here) and Soft skills framework (available here).*