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Skills development: pathway to youth employment

Huub Mudde, PhD¹
Rita van Deuren, PhD²

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¹ Senior Project Consultant, Maastricht School of Management

² Head Global Custom Programs / Senior Project Consultant / Assistant Professor

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The need for skills development

By 2030 an estimated 77 per cent of all young people in the world (aged 15 – 24) will live in Africa, Asia and the Pacific (ILO, 2017). Although the unemployment rate of youth on a global scale remains more or less stable at 12 per cent, major differences exist among regions. In particular, in Northern Africa and the Middle East the unemployment rates are high, 30.1 and 20 per cent respectively. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the youth unemployment rate is lower, an estimated 9.8 per cent in 2019, but on the rise (ILO, 2018). In Africa, the most youthful continent, insufficient employment opportunities are being created for the millions of new labour market entrants. Youth employment has thus become a priority area of concern by many, including governmental donor agencies.

The multiple factors that contribute to youth unemployment can be categorized in three groups:

- Scarcity of (appropriate) jobs for the working-age population (demand);
- Difficulty of connecting skilled youth to employers, for instance due to uncompetitive wages or poor recruitment practices (matching) and;
- Many youths lack the right set of skills needed by employers or for starting their own business (supply).

This concept note proposes an approach for addressing the lack of skills (supply), in particular those skills that are of relevance for any job or self-employment. These transferable, cross-cutting skills are different than technical (or hard) skills, which are needed for performing a specific job.

Cross-cutting skills

In many project interventions as well as in formal education, skill development has been biased on practical technical skills, overlooking the need for strengthening cross-cutting so-called *21-century skills*, essential skills needed by the labour market. These 21-century skills are related to self-awareness, collaboration, and problem-solving, like communication, teamwork, leadership, and customer service skills (Mitchell, Skinner, and White, 2010; Griffin and Annulis, 2013; Stawiski, Germuth, Yarborough, Alford, and Parrish, 2017). They overlap with what are considered entrepreneurial skills (Mudde, 2020). Strengthening *entrepreneurial skills* would not only benefit young people who aspire to start-up a business, but all youth³. Frank (2007) lists these skills as follows:

- Opportunity seeking
- Initiative taking
- Willingness to take ownership
- Commitment to see things through
- Strong sense of autonomy
- Intuitive decision making with limited information
- Networking capacity

³ A related concept is 'enterprising tendency' (Caird, 1991), which includes attitudes, behaviours and skills: i) Achievement orientation (pursuing outcomes that satisfy personal needs, task and results oriented); ii) Autonomy & Independence (high self-reliance, being unconventional, strong personal opinions and ideas); iii) Creativity/Innovative (imaginative and innovative, versatile and curious, intuitive, seeking new challenges); iv) Risk taking (acting on incomplete information, coping with uncertainty, setting challenging but attainable goals); v) Drive & Determination (discounting fate, controlling own destiny, equating results with effort, showing considerable determination)

- Strategic thinking ability
- Negotiation capacity
- Selling/persuasive capacity
- Achievement orientation
- Willingness to take risks.

They also overlap with what is called *soft skills*. Dall'Amico and Verona (2015) define soft skills as

“a set of non-technical skills and knowledge that underpin successful participation in work. They are non-job specific and closely connected with personal attributes and attitudes (like confidence, discipline, and self-management), social (communication, team working, emotional intelligence) and management abilities (time keeping, problem solving, critical thinking).”

Soft skills are apart from basic skills like literacy, numeracy, language, and (more recently) basic IT skills. Other names used for soft skills are Generic Skills, Essential Skills, Skills for Life, People Skills, Key Skills/Competences, Employability Skills, Core Skills, Transversal Skills (Dall'Amico and Verona, 2015).

One of the expert organizations on skill development worldwide is ILO. They refer to core skills for employability, which ILO (2013) defines as “the abilities to learn and adapt; to read, write and compute competently; to listen and communicate effectively; to think creatively; to solve problems independently; to manage oneself at work; to interact with co-workers; to work in teams or groups; to handle basic technology; and to lead effectively as well as follow supervision.” Subsequently, ILO (2013) identifies four clusters of these core skills:

- *Learning to learn* covers the knowledge, skills, attitudes and aptitudes which enable individuals to set, plan and reach their own learning goals and become independent autonomous learners. These skills equip young people for lifelong learning.
- *Communication* covers the abilities to gain understanding from others – by listening, reading and observation, using both formal and informal, oral and written means – and to put across ideas clearly and effectively.
- *Teamwork* covers the abilities necessary to operate smoothly and efficiently within a group, including those related to both cooperation and leadership.
- *Problem-solving* covers the analytical skills required to evaluate information or situations and decide on the most appropriate ways of addressing problems. These skills include awareness of long-term consequences of actions taken and the capacity to assess and adapt plans of action.

Wild and Omingo (2020) in their study on East-African university graduates' employability skills propose a clustering of i) critical thinking and solving ill-structured problems; ii) entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship; and iii) communication, teamwork and conflict management.

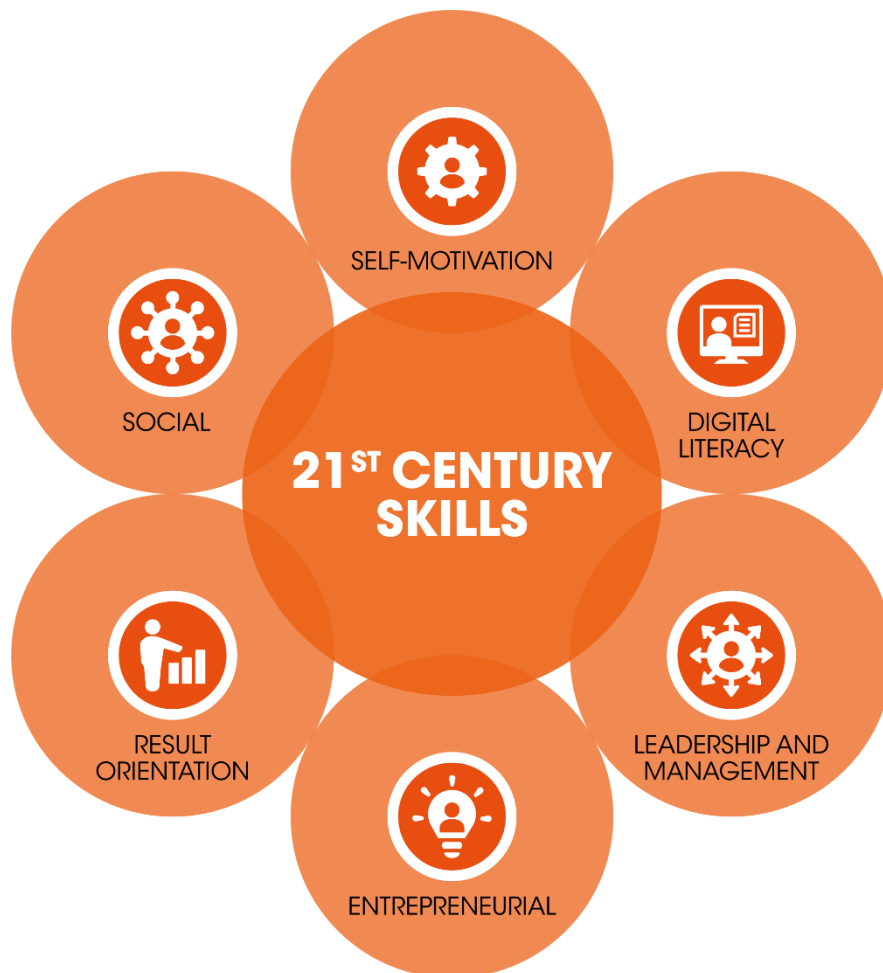
Furthermore, specific attention is needed for strengthening of leadership skills, in particular for young people that aspire middle or higher positions, like university students. MSM has a substantive track record on leadership training for professionals, covering a wide variety of topics like leadership styles, planning, coordinating and supervising teams, preparation and heading effective meetings, strategy development, managing change, and advanced communication skills.

Last, in addition to the above mentioned entrepreneurial, leadership and soft skills, nowadays it is understood that one needs to be digital literate in order to be able to perform in the world of work. Hence, this requires specific attention to strengthening digitalization skills. UNESCO defines digital literacy as “the ability to access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate and create information safely and appropriately through digital technologies for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship” (Law, N., Woo, D. Torre, J. de la and Wong, G., 2018). Subsequently, a Digital Literacy Global Framework is proposed comprising of six categories of competencies (p.23-24):

- *Devices and software operations*: the ability to identify and use hardware tools and technologies, and to identify data, information and digital content needed to operate software tools and technologies.
- *Information and data literacy*: the ability to articulate information needs, to locate and retrieve digital data, information and content; to judge the relevance of the source and its content; and to store, manage and organize digital data, information and content.
- *Communication and collaboration*: the ability to interact, communicate and collaborate through digital technologies while being aware of cultural and generational diversity; to participate in society through public and private digital services and participatory citizenship; and to manage one’s digital identity and reputation.
- *Digital content creation*: the ability to create and edit digital content; to improve and integrate information and content into an existing body of knowledge while understanding how copyright and licenses are to be applied; and to know how to give understandable instructions for a computer system.
- *Safety*: the ability to protect devices, content, personal data and privacy in digital environments; to protect physical and psychological health, and to be aware of digital technologies for social well-being and social inclusion; and to be aware of the environmental impact of digital technologies and their use.
- *Problem-solving*: the ability to identify needs and problems and to resolve conceptual problems and problem situations in digital environments; to use digital tools to innovate processes and products; and to keep up to date with the digital evolution.
- *Career-related competences*: the ability to operate specialized digital technologies and to understand, analyze and evaluate specialized data, information and digital content for a particular field.

MSM framework of 21st century skills

The above results in the following framework of what MSM considers as essential 21st century skills, relevant for all professionals in whatever position. The MSM framework is comprised of six clusters, combining and extending the framework from Dall’Amico and Verona (2015) and UNESCO: Self-motivation skills, Social skills, and Result-orientation skills – in togetherness covering soft skills -, Entrepreneurial skills, Leadership and Management skills, and Digital literacy skills.





Self-motivation skills

Time management	Capacity to plan, prioritize, develop personal effectiveness, respect schedules and deadlines and being on time
Motivation	Attitude to be energetic, enthusiastic, resilient, and capacity to self-motivate and motivate others
Adaptability and flexibility	Capacity to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accept changes as a new challenge • Cope with ambiguity • adapt to the new situations and modify approaches if required by the context in a timely manner
Managing responsibilities	Capacity to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check to have understood the task assigned and ask for assistance if needed • Take responsibility for one's own actions without blaming anyone else for something s/he is liable for • Being dependable by not letting others down
Self-esteem	Ability to rely on one's capability or potential to do something. Self-assurance to do something implies taking personal responsibility in life



Social skills

Team working	Capacity to understand the benefits of working in a team and work in collaborative style with others to achieve results, and to effectively developing and managing a team
Service skills	Capacity to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer support to others when asked for (empowerment) • Identify and respond to client needs (customer orientation)
Conflict management	Ability to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detect a negative conflict at an early stage without being afraid of calling it 'conflict' • Manage a negative conflict when it arises and address it without fear • Mediate, acting in such a way that one's and other's goals will be achieved (win-win approach) • Engage in positive conflict of ideas within a team to obtain the best outcome for all stakeholders concerned
Communication skills	Capacity to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speak clearly and politely to any typology of speakers (heads, colleagues, clients, etc.) • Use body language, gesture, tone/pitch of voices properly at different levels and contexts • Apply assertive communication by expressing feelings / thoughts / ideas • Know which medium to use when communicating at different levels and contexts (face to face / written letter / telephone / social media etc...) • Present information (also technical ones) clearly and in a style easily understood • Understand and interpret data (tables, figures, statistical data) accurately to support one's work effectively
Networking capacity	Ability to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connect among and build upon a diversity of people and their interests • Take initiative to collaborate with others

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate confidence for others to want to build relations with you • Actively listen to others placing them (not you) at the centre of conversation
Cultural and social awareness	<p>Ability to understand and appreciate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural differences and • Behavioral preferences based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, ability, marital status, or political affiliation



Result-orientation skills

Problem solving	Capacity to find and solve effectively routine, adaptive and creative problems to achieve work goals, as well as to anticipate them and reflect on the outcomes
Creativity and innovation	Ability to come up with new solutions, approaches, etc. and to think “out of the box”
Critical and structured thinking	Ability to analyze and valorize information and accept constructive criticism
Decision making	Capacity to make a choice from a range of possibilities; (also prioritizing actions) and use different decision-making approaches and reflect on the outcomes of a decision
Collecting and processing data	Ability to collect and process information needed to solve a problem or come to a decision



Entrepreneurial skills

Opportunity seeking	Ability to identify, consider, evaluate, and pursue market-based activities that are believed to be advantageous; to turn issues and problems around into business opportunities
Strategic thinking and envisioning ability	Ability to plan for the future; the capacity to set visions and goals, and systematically plan and monitor activities required to achieve goals and visions
Initiative taking	Ability to be resourceful and work without always being told what to do, and to be a self-starter
Negotiation and persuasion	<p>Ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pitch business needs with various stakeholders • Invite others to share their perspective • Consider options through reflexivity in advance of deal making with suppliers, unions, customers, investors and employees • Reach agreement on the terms and conditions of a negotiated outcome by allowing logic to over-rule ego • Influence others, prompting others to act favourably towards one’s products and services
Willing to take risks and learn from them	<p>Ability to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify risk and determine it’s probability of occurrence as well as its impact (consequences) • Take decisions that mitigate the identified risks • Act accordingly (willingness to take the risk) • Learn from failures



Leadership and management skills⁴

Planning, coordinating and supervising the work of others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding work processes and how they interrelate and interact • Allocate tasks within the work processes to others and agree on outputs and deadlines • Monitor performance of others and provide support where needed • Coordinate the tasks and communicate to ensure smooth work processes across various team members
Preparation and heading effective meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify objectives and participants in the meeting • Setting the agenda for the meeting • Encourage participation of all members and effectively apply relevant participative decision making • Clearly summarize decisions made and action points allocated • Writing up meeting notes and monitor follow-up
Influencing and inspiring others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a vision on the way forward for the team and inspirationally share with others • Believe that you can make a difference and initiate actions to implement and convince others • Identification of behavior and actions that are beneficial for the organization and the team • Understand the role of exemplary behavior in leading others and set an example for others to follow • Awareness of personal behavior and how it influences others
Providing feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mindset that feedback is not meant to sanction a person's behavior or personality but aims at improvement and learning • Identification of performance or behavior problems • Discuss performance or behavioral problems and potential solutions with the other person and agree on how performance or behavior can be improved



Digital literacy skills⁵

Information and data literacy	<p>Ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Browse, search and filter data, information and digital content • Evaluate and manage data, information and digital content
Communication and collaboration	<p>Ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interact and collaborate through digital technologies • Share data, information and digital content with others • Participate in society through the use of public and private digital services • Apply behavioral norms and know-how while using digital technologies and interacting in digital environments (netiquette) • Create and manage one or multiple digital identities
Digital content creation	<p>Ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create and edit digital content

⁴ The listed skills are considered to be relevant for all professionals in whatever position. Additional leadership and management skills are needed for middle and higher management, such as e.g. strategic leadership, managing organizational change, human resource management and financial management.

⁵ The UNESCO framework includes as well 'Devices and software operations: ability to identify and use the functions and features of hardware as well as essential software in digital devices'. MSM considers this part of basic skills.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve and integrate information and content into an existing body of knowledge • Understand how copyright and licenses apply to data, information and digital content
Safety	<p>Ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand risks and threats in digital environments • Protect personal data and privacy in digital environments • Avoid health-risks and threats to physical and psychological well-being while using digital technologies, and to be aware of digital technologies for social well-being and social inclusion • Be aware of the environmental impact of digital technologies and their use
Digital problem-solving	<p>Ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solve technical problems • Identify needs and technological responses • Creatively use digital technologies for knowledge creation and innovate processes and products • Identify digital competence gaps • Process a computable problem into sequential and logical steps (computational thinking)

Competency levels

For training and educational purposes, the above framework may be combined with competency levels. That will lead to a matrix indicating per level which skill is expected to be present to which extend. Dall'Amico and Verona (2015: p59) suggest five levels:

1. Novice: some theoretical knowledge but no (or little) practical experience of the skill
2. Beginner Performer: some practical experience of the skill and ability to perform it under significant supervision and guidance and only in basic routine and predictable tasks
3. Capable Performer: able to perform the skill in a range of contexts relying on explicit and implicit rules, able to apply autonomously in routine actions
4. Proficient Performer: able to perform the skill in complex and non-routine contexts, with significant responsibility and autonomy using intuitive and flexible approaches
5. Expert: able to completely autonomous perform the skill in any situation, and help others to develop the skill.

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