



## Research Article

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# The 'Soft' Gap: Educational Policy Making vs. Labour Market Requirements

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## Abstract

*Integrating oneself into the labor market is often depicted as one of the youth challenges worldwide during the post-university period. The long-existing myth of hard skills' requirements is substantially increasing employers, leaders, and employees' awareness of the importance of soft skills as complementary and essential features of a worker's competitive strength in the labor market. In today's globalized society, mastering soft skills produces predictability in terms of employment. It has already become an inseparable part of a person's resume, inspiring youth to better assess soft skills' value and importance, if they are to become actively engaged workers guaranteeing their families' welfare and prosperity. Soft skills acquisition has brought a restructured school curricula too, meeting the requirements of our society, aiming at fitting the required professionalism and success. Albania, as part of the Western Balkan Countries, is going through vast rapid changes in every aspect of its society, two of which are also the labor market and the labor forces, struggling to overpass the gap between the two. This paper aims to identify and highlight some of the basic soft skills mostly required by the labor market nowadays. Through a comparative analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data gathered through questionnaires and interviews, the research points out some of the essential soft skills employees need to possess to compete in the labor market successfully. Implementing a transforming educational policy highlighting and mastering soft skills would mark the key to an inspiring workplace environment, guaranteeing success in the future.*

**Keywords:** soft skills, educational policy, labor market, employment

## 1. Introduction

In the framework of the dynamics of the global employment market, there has been an enhanced necessity for acquiring soft skills and vocational education among youth, especially when it comes to specific professions. A wide range of actors such as entrepreneurs (Bird, T. et. al., 2017) vocational

school principals, educators, etc. not only do promote these skills but also strongly believe that they enhance “chances of employability” (Tran, Th., 2013) among job searchers.

This research study conducted in the region of Elbasan, Albania, not only provides detailed analyses of this issue but has also served as a rich source of information on real needs about what is expected and what is currently missing in the successful employment of youth in Albania (Buchert, L. 2014) as a simple appeal for all the appropriate institutions and the coordination they need to establish and further develop among each other.

Businesses involved in this research, through the realization of detailed structured questionnaires and interviews, have been able to generate concrete useful data on current needs or even future professions in the framework of individual professional skills and their orientation in the employment market.

Referring to the realized observations it has been comprehended that the employees of a business or particular institutions, who are characterized by a satisfactory level of competencies and vocational training do contribute a lot to the successful competition of the business, by better representing it in the sector where it operates and exercises its activity (Nagy, Z., 2019). However, setting up such a team in one's workplace is a real challenge nowadays, in terms of all the troubles of the external environment, and also other factors connected with education, individual training, and soft skills. What is more, Albania as a key country in the Western Balkans is not immune to technological development, thus encouraging the necessity of creating a positive experience for its employees and leadership, too.

Approaches to the education system and the increase of its quality constitute one of the basic elements in determining the employability of the labor force (Scheerens, J. et.al., 2020). Attempts in enhancing youth participation in vocational training (Emden, J. & Murphy, L., 2019) and qualification, aiming at overcoming the gap that exists in our country compared with other European countries will continue. Meanwhile, improvement in the quality and importance of professional education, prediction of skills required by the labor force, lifelong training, lifelong learning (Breslin, 2016), professional qualifications in the prioritized economic sectors, etc. will continue being at the core of various reforms (Lall, M., 2021) and strategies to enhance employability as well as the quality in the workplace.

The young people who set up the economy of the future, are getting today the required necessary knowledge through the educational system (Fung, D., 2017). These values are going to be displayed in tomorrow's labor market. The economy is passed from generation to generation not through inheritance but through lessons and adaptation. In each generation, people are always challenging new innovative ideas, competencies, and skills which are of great significant importance not only for them but also for society in general contributing to improving our living standards (Borner, K. et al, 2018).

In this current competitive world, everybody should search for improvement in his/her specific field of expertise. Professional skills acquisition is essential in improving one's career performance, one's self-motivation, etc. (Marques, J., 2013).

Over the last few years in Albania, many professional schools have established a consolidated relationship with businesses, which during the last five years, 2017-2021 according to INSTAT (Institute of Statistics, 2017) has reflected a decrease in unemployment among young people aged 15-29 years old. Meanwhile, some companies are offering professional practices, where entrepreneurs themselves are providing their contribution through their active membership participation in the decision-making processes of their governing boards.

Due to continuous efforts by the respective ministry concerning professional education, there has been noticed an increase in the number of young people being employed in this sector, from 17% in 2014 to 20.6% in 2018. However, this figure is still low in comparison to the other Western Balkan countries. It is to be admitted that professional education has been the least attractive one, although this image has started to change over the last few years.

Reforms are in progress but it is to be said that further attempts are to be made in the entire

system to fulfill improvements in the pilot institutions. Figures and statistics show that the number of young people, aged 15-24 years old who are not employed or are not attending professional education is still high (approximately 28.6% in 2018) in comparison to the average of the European Union countries, 10.6%. This confirms the existence of skills disbalances and serious troubles with the new graduates finding work in the labor market.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Institutional and regulatory framework

Educational institutions do have the responsibility to undertake reforms and implement in their teaching methods' strategies even those skills which help people get employed, more specifically "soft skills"<sup>1</sup> which have already become fundamental for the success of a business. Based on what is previously mentioned, the following question naturally arises: What can be done to develop these "soft skills" (Kumar, 2010) in people? How can educational institutions contribute to developing these skills? The two researchers, Lewin and Bronfenbrenner (Velez-Agosto, 2017) provide arguments supporting the idea that behavior is the result of interactivity between an individual (P) and the environment (E) where he/she lives and works. Consequently, behavior is the function of these two elements:

$$\text{Behavior} = f(P, E)$$

But because skills are acquired behaviors (not inherited), then it is necessary to mention that:

$$\text{Skills development} = f(P, E)$$

This described model proves that having the motivation and desire to acquire a skill is necessary but not enough; since there are plenty of other factors that influence this process.

Albina Khasanzyanova (2017) presents another point of view, that of engagement in volunteer activities as a factor that highly contributes to the expansion of students' professional experience, highlighting their abilities as part of their soft skills.

Besides the business industry where these skills seem to be obtained and developed, many researchers share the common opinion that soft skills acquisition, technical ones, etc will serve as a source of positive advantages, such as innovative ideas, the difference from the others, creativity, etc. (Bates, C., Morgan, D., 2018).

In 1991 education in Albania was oriented towards professional education mainly in two and four-year training cycles, which presented a combination of both theoretical and practical information, the latter an important component that was obligatory and regulated by law. Meanwhile, the transition period, 1997-1998 (Jager, 2013), was characterized by fundamental changes in various aspects of the country's government drawing people's attention and interest in professional education. If we go back in time, the regulatory basis for professional training dates in 2002, consisting of the approval of professional education law (no. 8872) known otherwise as the first attempt at creating a uniform legal framework.

Albanian Qualifications Framework (AQF) (Korniza Shqiptare e Kualifikimeve) is a national classification framework that structures qualifications into eight hierarchical levels, similar to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), (European Qualifications Framework, n.d)

National Employment and Skills Agency (NESA), (NESA, n.d) is a public service, legal, and budgeting person, under the responsibility of the respective minister responsible for employment and skills development.

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<sup>1</sup>According to Raj Kumar, *Basic Business Communication: Concepts, Applications, and Skills* 249 (2010); Daicoff, *supra* note 11, at 316 n.14, the words "Soft Skills" refer to certain skills such as communication, interpersonal skills; emotional intelligence, teamwork, negotiating skills, time management skills, etc.

## 2.2 Public Institutions of higher education that Operate in Albania

The vision of employment and skills strategy 2019-2022 is evaluated to be the same as that of 2014-2018, preserving the same vision and the same strategic priorities. During the process of the undertaken reforms, a great interest has been shown by the Universities, that is institutions of higher education, such as the case of Marin Barleti University<sup>2</sup>, which has brought an alternative to higher education consisting of practical models of learning and teaching which guide students into the Albanian and European labor market. It also equips students with the right skills, making them change but also be creative in their current or future jobs.

University Polis<sup>3</sup> through its Program of Professional Schools, offers professional study programs that aim at offering students basic practical knowledge of methods and general principles.

European University of Tirana<sup>4</sup> offers a professional study program, after high school, consisting of 120 credits, concerning the 5<sup>th</sup> level of the Albanian Qualifications Framework (AQF).

Out of the public higher institutions in Albania, University "Ismail Qemali"<sup>5</sup> in Vlora, has also turned its attention toward professional study programs offered to students.

Meanwhile, according to the data provided by the National Employment and Skills Agency (NESA), there have been estimated nearly 35 professional secondary schools. Their distribution is not homogenous. There are more schools in the central part of Albania, and 13 out of 35 professional institutions exist in the triangle of the cities Tiranë, Elbasan, and Durrës. But when it comes to private schools, they are mostly concentrated in Tirana.

## 3. Methodology

This research paper aims at providing a detailed descriptive analysis of soft skills in the educational context. It also provides a comparative view of the soft skills assessment derived from the comparison of the industries taken into account. The accuracy and quality of the analyses and conclusions reached in a research paper highly depend on the construction of the sample. Its biggest challenge lies in its selection in such a way that it best represents the population.<sup>6</sup> This research study was conducted with the support of the Chamber of Commerce<sup>7</sup> and Industry in the region of Elbasan assisted in generating useful data and information from the list of Operating businesses in the database of this institution. The data were obtained from a comparative view of the businesses' soft skills requirements. The data received also served as an indicator showing businesses' willingness in providing soft skills training possibilities to the employees.

The paper is written on a combination of desk and field research. Keeping the focus on the importance of soft skills, the first round of data collection in writing this paper consisted of a preliminary questionnaire, whose answers to the questions would provide fundamental raw material giving real insight into the current topic being discussed. Following the questionnaire the second round of data collection consisted of *data elaboration*, a process that determined the selected criteria to be used in setting up the sample, representing the picked businesses out of the overall total population in the region of Elbasan, Albania.

Out of 1630 registered business entities, most of them (74%) are small ones (our business

<sup>2</sup> Marin Barleti University <https://www.umb.edu.al/>

<sup>3</sup> University Polis, <https://www.universitetipolis.edu.al/shkolle-profesionale/>

<sup>4</sup> European University of Tirana <https://uet.edu.al/diplome-profesionale/>

<sup>5</sup> University of Vlora "Ismail Qemali" <https://univlora.edu.al/>

<sup>6</sup> The word Population refers to the total number of active businesses, according to the National Center of Registration in the region of Elbasan.

<sup>7</sup> It is to be emphasized that the information obtained from the Chamber of Commerce and Industry was only about the entities registered in it, representing in this way restricted information concerning the businesses operating in Elbasan. This implies that the list of businesses taken into consideration does not represent the entire number of businesses operating in the region of Elbasan, Albania.

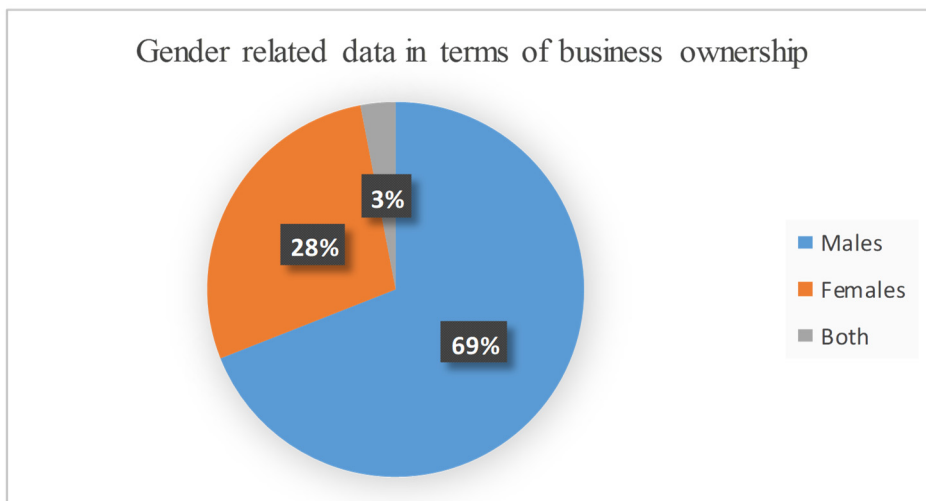
sampling) with an annual gross income of eight million leks, more or less during an entire fiscal year. Meanwhile, 25% of the total is represented by the big businesses whose annual gross income is more than 8 million leks, during an entire fiscal year. Consequently, the next testing step of the questionnaire would be its realization under the same conditions as the selected industries. There are currently realized 6 questionnaires or approximately 20% of the sampling ones (6/33 selecting business entities) which have been randomly selected from the list of Operating Business Entities. In this way, the data provision testing part was added to by the Chamber of Commerce and Industry helped in questionnaire fulfillment. It was also decided that the testing part be added to the sampling, finally concluding 39 business entities. The questionnaire consisted of four different sessions. To gain insight into the issue being discussed, it was allowed to be completed by the business employees not only the owners and administrators, who could provide precise, accurate information concerning their business history. This hierarchy of questionnaire completion addressing resulted in more suitable since these groups of employees often possessed more overall company information than the CEO, administrators, managers, etc.

#### 4. Findings and Analysis

After having completed the process of the field research, the team engaged intensively to work out the answers to the questionnaires, which served to enrich the database.

##### 4.1 General data of the sampled businesses

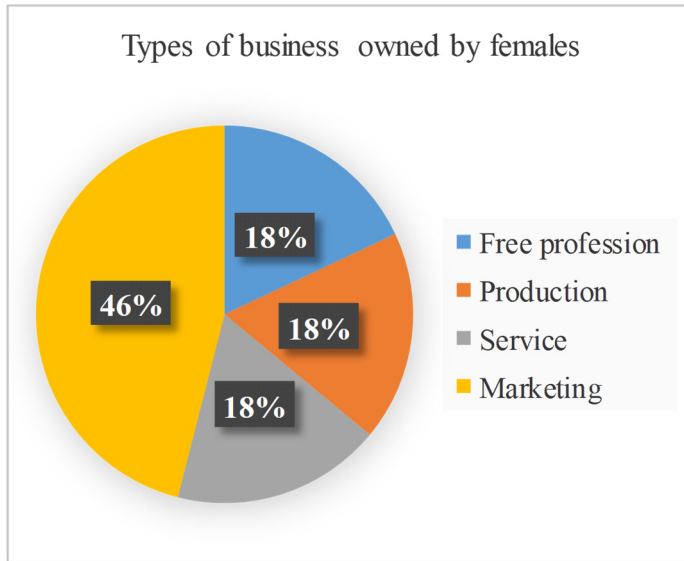
The following Graphic 1 reveals that more than half of the businesses, nearly 69% of them are owned by males, meanwhile, 28% of them are owned by women. Research has discovered that women are mostly entrepreneurs in the *trade industry*, being followed by the other categories with the same rates, as is already demonstrated in Graphic 2.



**Chart 1.** Gender-related data in terms of business ownership

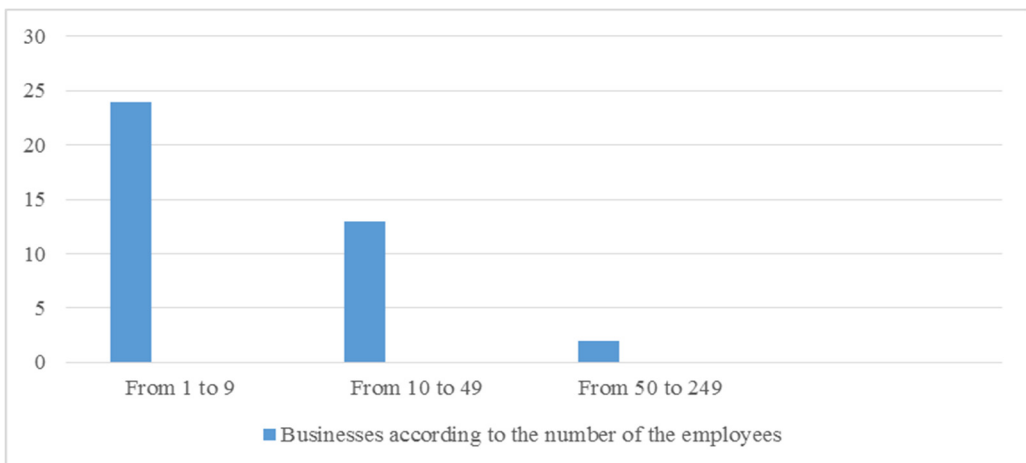
Female entrepreneurship has become widespread over the last 10 years, showing their stronger positions in society. The most common businesses dominated by women are those of tailoring, interior design, etc.

Out of these broad numbers two of the businesses made the difference. They were opened thirty years ago by women, and they are still owned by women. The difference is also marked by two businesses that were opened 30 years ago, under the management of a woman, who is still successful.



**Chart 2.** Types of businesses owned by females

Chart 3 highlights the number of employees in each of these businesses. Research has found that the biggest number of sampled businesses are considered small ones, referring to the number of employees they do have. Approximately, 61% of the businesses do have 1-9 employees employed in their companies. There has also been noticed a very positive relationship between the number of employees in a business and the types of training offered to them.



**Chart 3.** Businesses according to the number of their employees

Out of 24 businesses consisting of 1-9 employees, 46% of them (11 businesses) provide training opportunities, 36% of which do pay for the training period.

Out of 13 businesses consisting of 10-49 employees, 92% of them provide training opportunities, 75% of which do pay for the training period.

Therefore, as it can also be observed, due to the increase in the payment capacity of a business, they show willingness in paying for the training period for their employees.\*

While analyzing the data, it is to be mentioned that with the regulation of the legal and fiscal framework, the need for economists, financiers, and accountants is considered a necessity in most businesses. Furthermore, as already mentioned above, since most businesses consist of 1-9 employees, during interviewing it has been highlighted that in most cases the roles of an employee in a business are not set, as a result, an employee can take various roles in a particular company. In a small business, an employee can be a seller as well as a storekeeper too. This phenomenon in most cases comes as a result of the lack of a business's capacity in paying its employees as well as the lack of attention on the side of businesses in considering specific professions such as manager, marketing specialists, manager of human resources, etc. Considered from a different perspective, this culture of a business organization in the region of Elbasan will affect the future of these professions. Currently, only one out of 39 businesses have employed a marketing manager, and again only one business requires this profession as part of its future activity planning.

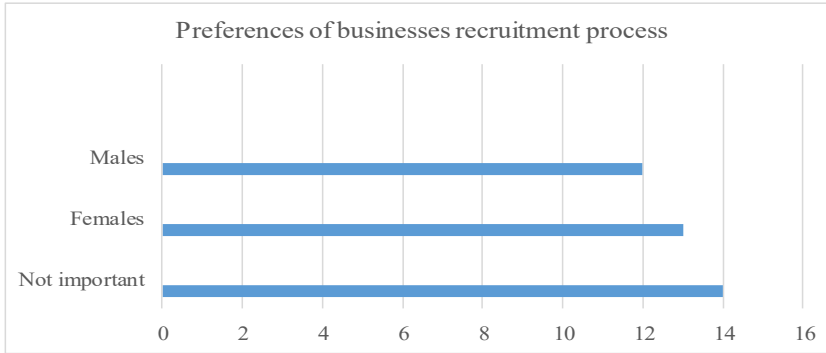
In the following table, there are mentioned assessments of different capacities separated and ranked according to the respective industry:

- *V.I Very important*
- *I Important*
- *Less Important*

**Table 1.** Skills assessment according to businesses' classification

Capacities	Construction	Production	Free profession	Service	Marketing
Technicality	V.I	I	I	I	I
Communication	I	V.I	V.I	V.I	V.I
Cooperation	I	I	I	V.I	V.I
IT	I	I	V.I	I	L.I
Leadership	I	I	V.I	I	I
Organization	I	V.I	I	V.I	I
Busy situations	I	V.I	V.I	V.I	I
Driving a car	V.I	I	I	V.I	I
Adaptation	L.I	I	I	V.I	I
Lesson	I	I	I	V.I	I
Integrity	L.I	I	V.I	I	V.I
Foreign language	L.I	L.I	I	I	L.I

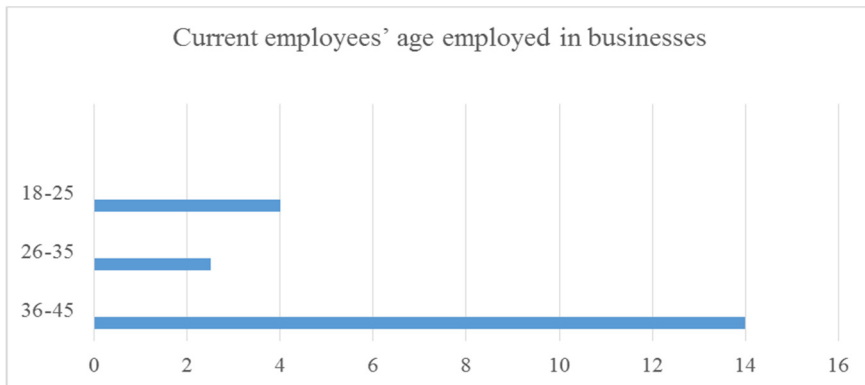
Preferences over the employment of men over women have mostly been associated with the nature of jobs considered to be more suitable for men than for women, such as sales agents, mechanics, barbers, etc. On the other side businesses that have always employed females have been mostly associated with professions such as dressmakers, assistants in hotels, waitresses, economists, etc. However, the only industry which is 100% neutral in its choice vs men or women is that of Free Jobs.



**Chart 4.** Preferences of businesses' recruitment process

One of the primary goals of the questionnaire was also the identification of the average age that is already employed in businesses to consider the age group most likely to be preferred by companies in the future. Approximately, 49% of the employees aged 26-35 years old, constitute the most required age group for businesses.

Employees aged 36-45 years old constitute the second most preferred group when it comes to recruitment. Nowadays, the most preferred age for recruitment is 36-45 years old, meanwhile, age groups 18-25 years old are preferred by only four of the companies. \*



**Chart 5.** Current employees' age employed in businesses

If Chart 5 shows the average age of the employees at a general level, the following charts: Chart 6,7,8 demonstrate the age of the current employees divided according to industries. It is to be highlighted that free professions mainly recruit employees aged 26-35 years old; whereas construction employees are between 36-45 years old.

In the market and service industry, all ages are present when it comes to recruitment, but the most dominant one is between 18-25 years old, accepted by nearly 80%. This category is mainly employed in bars and restaurants.

The trade and service industry recruits different ages, but the most dominant one is between 35-45 years old, which constitutes nearly 72% of the employees, employed in businesses such as Import-Export, gas selling, etc.



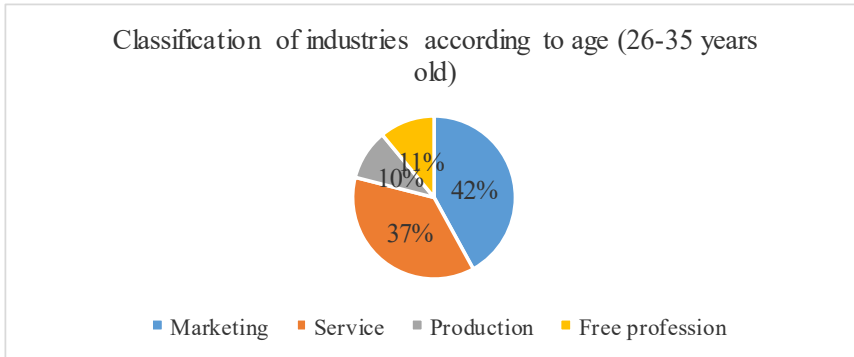


Chart 6. Classification of industries according to age (26-35 years old)

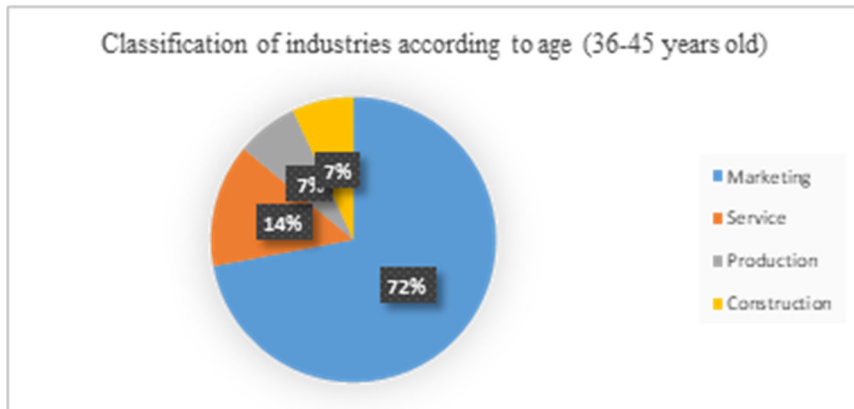


Chart 7. Classification of industries according to age (36-45 years old)

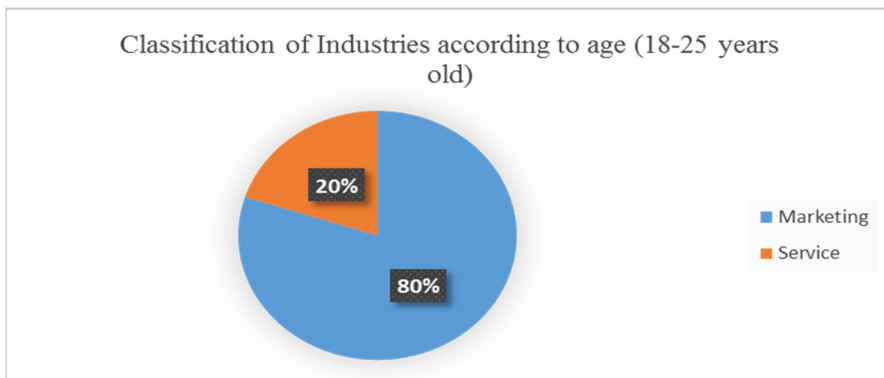
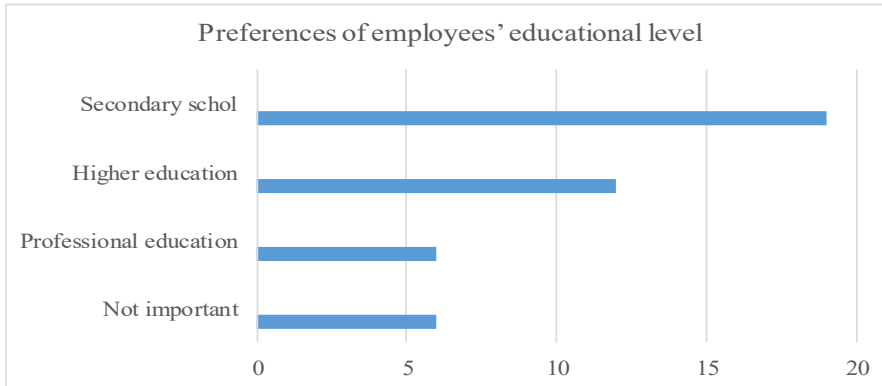


Chart 8. Classification of industries according to age (18-25 years old)

Preferences upon education were one of the questions businesses were asked about, whose answers are illustrated in Graphic 13. Having a university degree seems to be considered a necessity in

possessing and mastering managing skills. When it comes to common employees, most businesses prefer workers having graduated from secondary school. Twelve businesses share the idea that higher education is a must for the majority of professions, meanwhile, when it comes to professional education only 6 businesses consider it a necessity. The same number applies to the "it is not important" answer.



**Chart 9.** Preferences of Employees' educational level

Table 2 reflects some of the reasons for businesses' choices of their employees. Nearly all businesses seem to encounter difficulty in the business-client relationship, more specifically the way they communicate. Therefore, after every educational level, it is pretended to improve the process of communication, as one of the basic soft skills employees need to possess in their workplace.

**Table 2.** Reasons for educational level choice by Businesses

Educational level	Reasoning
<b>Secondary education</b>	From the business side, secondary education is considered a necessity in terms of the level of communication with the client, and the use of literary language. The secondary school level of education is considered to be the minimal one, to profit and absorb work as soon as possible, by making use of the training offered by work itself. Educational level is connected with the organizational skills of the employees in a company Secondary education is considered important for those employees that have direct contact with documents filing, documents preservation, monetary means, etc. Secondary education is essential in establishing and maintaining close relationships with clients.
<b>Higher education</b>	Businesses strongly support the idea that there exists a positive relationship between education and performance. The higher the education, the higher the quality of the work service offered. Higher education is essential for some specific professions. Higher education is the one that provides specific knowledge to the employees.
<b>Professional Education</b>	Selection of professional education is mainly based on technical issues, especially for those professions in which professional education is seen as an experience.
<b>Not important</b>	Work can be learned through fieldwork, therefore selecting the level of education does not influence employees. Some professions can be required even through short-term professional courses. Previous experience with employers, showing willingness and devotion over a job although the person might not have graduated higher university.

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The elaboration of the data obtained from the questionnaires and interviews provided a detailed descriptive view of soft skills and their requirements in the labor market. It also provided outstanding results in terms of soft skills requirements and businesses' willingness in providing training to their employees. There has been evidenced a very positive relationship between big businesses themselves (expressed mainly through the number of employees) and the training possibilities they offer to their employees. The correlation is the same when it comes to the payment for the training period. Statistics show that out of 24 businesses (consisting of 1-9 employees), 46% of them (11 businesses out of 24) provide training possibilities and 36% do pay for it. Furthermore, from 13 businesses (consisting of 10-49 employees), 92% of them provide training opportunities, and 75% do pay for the employees' training period. In cases when businesses do not have consistency in their payment of the training period, a display of high performance and dedication during the training period urges them to pay the employees.

Another essential element that has been highlighted from the research is that businesses do not seem to trust cooperation with the Work Office and the Center of Professional Education. However, this can not be generalized for the businesses that operate in the region of Elbasan for which the Work Office has been assessed as the most used channel of employment in comparison to other alternatives.

Regarding businesses' announced vacancies and the recruitment of their employees, it does not seem to cause problems. Businesses do provide clear and full information about what they are looking for. During the survey, 31 out of 39 businesses do provide information on: the required profession, the required experience, educational level, business location, timetable, and work conditions, whether it is part-time or not, as well as the initial salary.

Another interesting element identified is the age of the employees. The employees of nearly half of the businesses asked (49%) belong to the age of 26-35 years old, making it the most required one from businesses. It is also observed that free professions do have an age group of 26-35 years old, at a time when the instruction industry does employ an age group of 36-45 years old.

The weakest points that businesses notice in their employees are communication and behavior, lack of motivation, and performance not following what is expected. This can be viewed in Table 1, through a comparison of businesses and the services offered by them.

Our education system, unfortunately, does not contribute to the general knowledge of students. It is a system that does not recognize the full range of qualities required in a certain profession or workplace. Students should be allowed to go beyond their textbooks. They should learn how to become independent thinkers, and problem solvers, based on cognitive and non-cognitive skills, supported by specialized technical skills and the ability to learn new skills in the future.

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