



JADE PROGRAMME BRIEFING NOTE / NUMBER 2 / SEPTEMBER 2023

ARE SOFT SKILLS AN ASSET FOR OVERALL INTEGRATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE?

GRET and its partners are exploring new dimensions of youth integration via the JADE¹ programme², funded by Agence française de développement. This programme aims to design and test innovative, relevant ways of supporting young people in their overall integration. This means focusing not just on economic and professional integration, but also on social, civic, environmental and climatic integration.

In this context, GRET and its partners are conducting strategic reflection, drawing on their experiences in the field and on the progress made by research in these areas. A summary of this progress is presented in factsheets drawn up to create a common base of knowledge and reflection on youth and overall integration. In this regard, we should underline the limits of the exercise, which remains dependent on the progress of research on these subjects. In this factsheet, GRET examines the added value of soft skills as a means to strengthen the process of overall youth integration.

According to the International Labour Office, employability is made up of “portable competencies and qualifications that enhance an individual’s capacity to make use of the education and training opportunities available in order to secure and retain decent work, to progress within the enterprise and between jobs, and to cope with changing technology and labour market conditions”.

Soft skills, as opposed to hard skills, which are made up of academic and technical skills, are part of these competencies. Today they are widely considered to be just as important as hard skills, particularly in Europe. However, in certain contexts and certain parts of the world, they are not always taken into account to the same extent. Soft skills can be found in different forms in international development programmes based on vocational education or training. When they are present, they are often considered to be lesser than technical skills, which enable a trade to be learnt, and are sometimes neglected in terms of allocated time or budget.

1. Jeunesses Actrices du Monde de D’Emain (Young People as Stakeholders in the Future).
2. “JADE – Young people as stakeholders in the future” (online), GRET.

GRET works in countries where young people account for a very high proportion of the population, posing a challenge for development. This is why the multi-country JADE programme agreement, being implemented by GRET, places young people within a dynamic of overall integration³ (socio-professional, civic and environmental), enabling them to become stakeholders in the societies of the future. In this context, development and strengthening of soft skills are crucial. However, implementation of activities related to these skills must be planned in an appropriate manner to ensure participants are on board and to favour awareness processes. Initial points for consideration concern the **importance of valorising soft skills in training and professional integration projects, with a view to overall integration.**

Firstly, the competencies designated by the term soft skills will be defined, keeping in mind that definitions and terms may differ according to references. Secondly, the benefits of including soft skills will be examined through examples of projects and programmes illustrating processes for their incorporation. Lastly, this note will focus on questions that should be asked and relevant approaches for the incorporation of soft skills in training and integration support.

WHAT ARE “SOFT SKILLS”?

Soft skills designate competencies. However, classification of competencies can vary in the literature on this subject. Categories differ according to the prism chosen: formal education, non-formal education, work experience... Nevertheless, some categories recur almost systematically and are rarely challenged.

Cognitive skills are associated with intellectual skills and learning. Their categorisation is often the same, apart from certain specific skills such as the capacity to solve a problem, which is sometimes considered to be a soft skill, or a behavioural skill.

Non-cognitive skills are a broader category, with differences from one classification to another. They are often classified in sub-categories — life skills, socio-emotional skills, socio-behavioural skills, soft skills, behavioural skills... This category covers all skills that are not cognitive and not related to learning and intellectual capacities. It can also include personality traits (being extrovert for example) and skills that can be worked on and developed (the capacity to speak in public). **Sub-categories of non-cognitive skills** are defined according to the prism through which these skills are studied. As the term soft skills in the literature refers mainly to non-cognitive skills expected in the workplace, this is the prism retained in this briefing note. **Life skills** are close to soft skills, but are not confined to the world of work. The WHO defines them as “*a person’s ability to maintain a state of mental wellbeing and to demonstrate this in adaptive and positive behaviour while interacting with others, his/her culture and environment*”. For example, skills

identified can be: knowing how to make decisions, having a creative thought, having empathy... The difference between soft skills and life skills will therefore depend on the **prism of analysis**, between the world of work and personal development.

However, there are different denominations that have the same meaning in GRET’s projects. Some employment-integration and nutrition projects use the term **psychosocial skills**. The Parein project, conducted in Pointe-Noire, in the Republic of Congo⁴, used the term **socio-behavioural skills**, while in various training and professional integration projects in Senegal, the term **personal development** is used, in line with the vocabulary of the country’s official curricula. The terminology echoes the classification of soft skills set out in the Muva/Essor *Manuel de Formation Humaine*⁵, which divides them into **interpersonal skills** (concentration, communication and team work) and **intrapersonal skills** (emotional capacity, self-knowledge and motivation to work).

For all projects, analyses, studies, etc., on soft skills, this plurality of terms and classifications requires **precise definition of the skills in question.**

HOW ARE SOFT SKILLS INCLUDED IN DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS?

Several projects and programmes conducted by NGOs and other development organisations include soft skills in their activities. Entry points differ according to the prism of the project. However, it should be noted that activities aimed at developing/strengthening soft skills are always conducted **with a view to a broader objective.**

Some programmes include soft skills in curricula aimed at developing project management and/or entrepreneurship, such as **UPSHIFT**⁶ (developed and implemented with UNICEF) or **Asili** in DRC⁷.

3. For the JADE programme agreement, overall integration is defined as a “process through which a person integrates and questions the norms, values and demands of the society and the territory in which they live, are recognised and act. Integration takes place within a multidimensional dynamic, aimed at equipping each person with the capacity to have:

- an economic role as an actor in their own financial empowerment;
- a social role as an actor in their civic participation and their involvement in society;
- an environmental and climatic role as an actor in the response to ecological transition challenges.

4. « Parein – Projet d’appui au renforcement de l’employabilité et à l’insertion professionnelle des jeunes vulnérables à Pointe-Noire » (online), GRET.

5. *Manuel de formation humaine*, Muva Pro & NGO Essor, 2020.

6. “[The UPSHIFT Approach](#)” (online), UNICEF.

7. More information: “[The Community Enterprise That’s Creating New Possibilities in the DRC](#)” (online), IDEO.ORG.



YOUNG WOMEN RECEIVE TRAINING ON DRAWING UP A BUSINESS PLAN, PAREIN PROJECT IN POINTE NOIRE, REPUBLIC OF CONGO

UPSHIFT is a training programme for young people who have concrete projects but lack the tools and knowledge to carry them out. Different stages of training enable them to develop cognitive, technical, and soft skills that will help them achieve their objectives. In the **Asili** project, the training curriculum designed based on the Human Centred Design method aims to build and implement community-based solutions for access to water. The development and strengthening of creative thinking to design solutions by several community representatives increase the project's chances of success and sustainability.

In these two examples, the soft skills worked on are additional tools to carry out a professional or community project.

Muva's **Formation Humaine**⁸ (Human Training), implemented by international NGO Essor, is being rolled out in parallel to vocational training. This eighty-hour modular training is part of a nine-month training and professional integration course. Designed for a project in Mozambique, it was subsequently reworked and adapted for delivery in the other countries where Essor works. The trainer's guide designed for this training places particular emphasis on the attitude of facilitators, who come from the communities with which they work, and on the pedagogy used, derived from popular education: the facilitator is neutral, learning is horizontal and participants' experience is valorised.

The same dynamic applies to the **Seeds of Hope** programme run by the IECD⁹ in several countries. Local vocational training centres are strengthened

and benefit from complementary training, including integration of soft skills in young people's learning.

In training and professional integration projects conducted by GRET, soft skills are also taken into account. They are included in vocational training curricula through modules implemented by training centres or in complementary modules (in the *Qualemploi* and *Pacifa*¹⁰ projects in Senegal, *Safire*¹¹ in Mauritania, *Jagov*¹² in the Republic of Congo, *Imyeta*¹³ in Mali), delivered by private or public trainers. In Senegal, Academic centres for education and career guidance (public bodies) deliver this training, with support from GRET. Identification and inclusion of young people's soft skills have an impact on the course of their career guidance. For example, in Mauritania, the *Safire* project is strengthening career guidance counsellors to assess the **life skills** of the young people who contact them.

8. *Manuel de formation humaine*, Muva Pro & NGO Essor, 2020.

9. "[The Seeds of Hope programme has the wind in its sails!](#)" (online), IECD, 2017.

10. "[Projet Pacifa - Développer la formation professionnelle par apprentissage dans la région de Kolda](#)" (online), GRET.

11. "[Safire Brakna - Sécurité alimentaire, formation, insertion, résilience, emploi](#)" (online), GRET.

12. "[Jagov - Accompagnement des jeunes via l'appui à la gouvernance et à la valorisation du métier d'opérateur de pré-collecte des déchets](#)" (online), GRET.

13. "[Projet Imyeta - Améliorer l'employabilité des jeunes ruraux maliens par l'apprentissage tutoré](#)" (online), GRET.

These non-exhaustive examples of where soft skills were included in development projects demonstrate the importance of their integration in broader objectives. The projects mentioned respond to the concrete needs of a vulnerable population. If modules to strengthen soft skills are not complemented by theoretic training enabling a trade to be learnt or a concrete solution for a community problem to be implemented, participants' interest in them will be very limited. Learning and development of soft skills are therefore not an end in itself, they are **tools that are used in an integrated approach**, but their importance should not be underestimated.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF TAKING SOFT SKILLS INTO ACCOUNT IN A TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL INTEGRATION COURSE?

Taking soft skills into account has advantages at various levels:

- From the outset of the course for young people, **it enables better career guidance**. Better self-knowledge enables young people who want to do a training and professional integration course to make informed choices. Awareness of self, of one's capacities and wishes is an important factor in decision-making. This is why career guidance counsellors' capacities to detect young people's skills and their potential for development makes it possible to refine their career guidance advice.
- Strengthening of soft skills enables **learners' and apprentices' employability to be improved**. During the design of the Muva-Essor human training curriculum, a significant phase during which focus groups were observed and analysed enabled trainers to define which soft skills could and needed to be strengthened through training. 180 inappropriate behaviour indicators were highlighted, and 6 key indicators were selected for design of the training. This approach made it possible to ensure that the soft skills chosen for the Human Training course were aligned with employers' needs, while at the same time focusing on the concrete skills it was possible to work on, and, more importantly, measuring evolution. Even though a young trainee's access to employment depends primarily on their technical skills, soft skills also contribute to improving their employability.
- With regard to young people who want to be self-employed, development of soft skills is also **a lever to set up and maintain their business**. They are an integral part of the skills necessary for an entrepreneurial project to succeed: critical thinking, capacity to communicate on one's work, to work in a team for joint projects, etc. For example, in the event where the start-up of a business requires a loan from a microfinance or banking institution, young entrepreneurs have a greater chance of success if they have a project that is co-constructed by several people. The business also has a better chance of succeeding if the various members are capable of working in a team.





JOHN OYELA WAS TRAINED TO BE A WASTE PRE-COLLECTION OPERATOR AS PART OF THE JAGOV PROJECT IN BRAZZAVILLE, IN THE REPUBLIC OF CONGO. FOLLOWING HIS PLACEMENT, JOHN IS STILL WORKING WITH HIS TUTOR, CAMILLE NKOUA.

- As part of numerous training and professional integration projects conducted by GRET, professionals who were in direct contact with young people noted the importance of strengthening learners' soft skills in accordance with the trades for which they were trained. When possible, short training modules are delivered, as was the case with the Jagov project that trained young people to become waste pre-collection operators. Although short, **these modules demonstrated a positive impact on participants**, who often mentioned this in end-of-training evaluation questionnaires. The professionals concerned also noted that group work has a positive impact on apprentices' soft skills. As they work on developing their empathy, listening to other people's experiences enables them to grow and question their own experiences, which is particularly useful when gender-related issues within a mixed group are concerned.
- A study by Jason M. Fletcher and Barbara Wolfe¹⁴ demonstrates the link between young people's level of soft skills and their family's income. **The lower the family's income, the lower the family members' soft skills.** As training and professional integration projects are mainly designed for young people in vulnerable situations, including a soft skills component in training curricula can contribute to reducing inequalities between young people based on their socio-economic backgrounds.
- Following the MUVA'titude¹⁵ project in Mozambique, monitoring and evaluation of trainees' soft

skills and an analysis of impact six months after the end of the training course were conducted. Based on participants' feedback, what emerges are an increase in their capacity to communicate and express themselves, an improvement in their capacity to listen and work in a team, and better self-knowledge. Participants also mention the influence the training had on their self-awareness and their self-assertiveness. **This had an impact notably on the position of women in their homes and their communities, and led participants to think about and question social norms.**

Soft skills therefore have positive effects apart from the not inconsiderable advantage of employability. A training module on soft skills within a transformative, reflective approach can enable young people to have greater awareness.

Without an awareness of self and one's place within an environment, of one's strong points and characteristics, a young person cannot become integrated as a citizen in a given space. Modules aimed at developing and strengthening soft skills are therefore a fundamental lever to place young people in an overall integration approach.

14. M. FLETCHER Jason and WOLFE Barbara, "The importance of family income in the training and evolution of non-cognitive skills in childhood", *Economics of Education Review*, volume n° 54, October 2016.

15. "[MUVA'titude : transformer l'EFTP pour offrir une formation sur les compétences](#)" (online), Auda-Nepad, 2020.



TRAINEE MECHANIC GNIMA MANSALY WORKING ON WELDING, WITH ELECTRICITY FUELLED BY SOLAR POWER IN KOLDA, SENEGAL, QUALEMPLOI PROJECT

HOW CAN SOFT SKILLS BE INCORPORATED IN A TRAINING COURSE IN A RELEVANT AND APPROPRIATE WAY?

While the incorporation of soft skills in a training and professional integration project has many benefits, several key points require particular attention, in their design and implementation, so that their inclusion provides real added value.

- **These modules must be part of a broader project or programme.** If apprentices and learners are not trained in technical skills and are not able to enter employment following training, a soft-skills based approach will not work. Enabling young people to have self-awareness and developing their intra- and inter- personal skills is only possible when more essential needs have been met: if young people are not equipped to do this, they will not adhere to the project.
- Several different approaches can be taken to introduce soft skills in a training curriculum in a given territory: the first question to be asked is what already exists? Is this subject addressed by the relevant Ministries (Education, Technical and Voca-

tional Training, Employment, Higher Education...)? Is it addressed by private stakeholders in the territory (NGOs, private training centres, etc.)? If so, how is it dealt with? What skills are they working on? What methodology is used? What messages are conveyed? How are trainers trained, who are they? How are these soft skills monitored and evaluated? What is the impact on young people's educational pathways, and on their overall integration? **Starting with what already exists reduces the risks of a biased approach and increases the extent to which cultural specificities are taken into account, rather than reproducing a uniform module that could be irrelevant and not aligned with realities in the territory.**

- When no institutional actors are already working on soft skills, several approaches are possible, depending on the scope of the project. A project dedicating **considerable time to upstream analysis makes it possible to have a substantial observation phase** (study of employment areas and soft skills needed for the trades selected, identification of existing deficiencies in a representative sample of the target population). During this observation phase, outreach work with business owners and representatives of human resources concerned by the project's sector of activity, and with training project

managers, improves the quality of targeting. For smaller projects, it is not always possible to carry out this observation and design phase. **Adapting modules that already exist through a partnership is often the best option.** Freely accessible modules are available online or on request (Human Training, UPSHIFT, etc.). However, it is essential to **ensure time for consultation, even minimal, with actors in the sector in order to adapt curricula for the closest possible alignment with the needs of the zone concerned.** These actors are best able to ensure that the soft skills focused on in the modules are aligned with cultural specificities.

- **Facilitation methods** are a decisive factor in young people taking ownership of the modules: as soft skills are skills that are acquired with levers of reflection and change, it is crucial to avoid so-called “formal” training using top-down methods whereby learners are in a passive position. **The use of popular education techniques, where the trainer acts as a facilitator and the group is a source of emulation and co-construction, enables modules on development of soft skills to be an effective tool with a view to overall integration and awareness.** To do this, it is vital to have facilitators who are trained in these methods and capable of creating spaces where participants feel free to speak and share.
- Work with the young trainees’ environment must also be taken into account. The objective of soft skills modules is to generate changes in apprentices and learners, in terms of non-cognitive skills for work, but also with a view to transformative overall integration. If the young person’s environment cannot accommodate the changes that may occur in him or her, obstacles to the development and/or strengthening of that young person’s skills can rapidly emerge. **Taking the entourage of young**

people into account is therefore important when designing and conducting a project incorporating soft skills.

- **Monitoring and evaluation** is another challenge posed by the design and delivery of soft skills modules in a training and professional integration project. At Muva, the monitoring and evaluation team proposed increasing the quantity of monitoring indicators to reduce the potential for bias. In development projects, it is not unusual for monitoring of apprentices’ and learners’ soft skills to be conducted via various self-evaluations during the course. Yet, the young people questioned can easily have a biased view due to their lack of references and because they want to be socially desirable, especially if they have a low level of education. To compensate for these biases, tests based on tasks observed by a group of professionals were conducted. Each soft skill evaluated is graded according to a scale with a predefined level. These tests take place before the training is delivered, halfway through the training and when it finishes, in order to observe progression. Similarly, in order to collect qualitative indicators, a representative sample of young trainees were invited to express their opinions on the training received and the impact on their daily life. **The combination of these various monitoring and evaluation methods reduces biases and enables a more comprehensive analysis of the immediate and long-term effects of the training.** A stringent monitoring and evaluation system makes it possible to collect reliable data on the impact soft skills have on a young person’s socio-professional trajectory, as well as on his/her overall integration and awareness on broader subjects. **This makes it possible to defend the importance of soft skills, which are still insufficiently considered in development projects and international funding.**

KEY POINTS

- > Soft skills training modules must be part of a project or programme with broader objectives (vocational training, project management training, etc.).
- > Strengthening local actors to deliver this training reduces biases and ensures alignment with the local labour market.
- > Curricula designed by specialist associations already exist and can be used after they have been adapted in consultation with the local actors concerned.
- > If possible, when creating new modules, significant time should be given to observation and analysis, together with business owners and human resources, in order to align the training delivered with the needs of the sector.
- > As development of soft skills is carried out using transformative cognitive levers, it is useful to adopt popular education training methods, where the group drives teaching.
- > In order for these modules to have real transformative impacts, it is important to also work with the young trainees’ environment.
- > Modules must include a stringent monitoring and evaluation system combining sources and not merely using self-evaluation questionnaires, which have too many biases.

CONCLUSION

Incorporating soft skills in training and integration projects **improves the employability** of young trainees, whether they are seeking salaried employment or want to become self-employed. Although soft skills alone are not sufficient and cannot replace the acquisition of solid, appropriate technical skills, they are an **important complement** to trade and entrepreneurial training. Apart from their added value for the socio-professional integration of young trainees, they are **effective tools to favour their overall integration**. The development of these skills requires cognitive and transformative actions, enabling young people to **change their view** of themselves and their environment.

This is why GRET's training and professional integration projects, supported by the JADE programme, taking an approach focused on young people as proactive stakeholders in their own lives, aim to increasingly develop the incorporation of soft skills modules in their curricula. This can be done by considering the key issues mentioned above, in order to ensure **alignment with local labour market needs and cultures**. Accompanied by global reflection on the challenges posed by young people and their overall integration, these modules can be concrete tools that have **transformational, positive impacts** on the overall integration of young people. ■

This note was written by

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PASCALINE DIARRA, BINTOU SANOGO AND FATOUMATA BAGAYOKO, IN THE SÉGOU REGION IN CENTRAL MALI. THEY WERE TRAINED IN AGRIFOOD PROCESSING TRADES AS PART OF THE IMYETA PROJECT



FURTHER READING



- > BEAUCHER Hélène, *Les compétences de vie : une priorité internationale*, Revue internationale d'éducation de Sèvres, T 87, September 2021.
- > BISCHLER Jana, HOLLAND Jeremy, *Evaluating the effects of a bundled youth employment intervention in Mozambique. A mixed-methods evaluation of MUVA'titude*, Muva.
- > *Manuel de formation humaine*, Muva Pro & NGO Essor, 2020.
- > M. FLETCHER Jason, WOLFE Barbara, *The importance of family income in the formation and evolution of non-cognitive skills in childhood*, Economics of Education Review, volume n° 54, October 2016.
- > MILWARD Kristy, *Defining Skills*. Oxford Policy Management, Ligada Literature Review: Brief n° 6 Part 1.

- > MILWARD Kristy, *Measuring skills*. Oxford Policy Management, Ligada Literature Review: Brief No. 6 Part 2.

ONLINE SOURCES

- > [“JADE - Young people as stakeholders in the future”](#) (online), GRET.
- > [“Jagov - Accompagnement des jeunes via l'appui à la gouvernance et à la valorisation du métier d'opérateur de pré-collecte des déchets”](#) (online), GRET.
- > [“The Seeds of Hope Programme has the Wind in its Sails”](#) (online), IECD, 2017.
- > [“MUVA'titude : transformer l'EFTP pour offrir une formation sur les compétences”](#) (online), Auda-Nepad, 2020.
- > [“Parein - Améliorer l'insertion socio-professionnelle des jeunes en situation de vulnérabilité”](#) (online), GRET.

- > [“Imyeta project - Improving young rural Malians' employability through tutorial apprenticeship”](#) (online), GRET.
- > [“Projet Pacifa - Développer la formation professionnelle par apprentissage dans la région de Kolda”](#) (online), GRET.
- > [“Safire Brakna - Sécurité alimentaire, formation, insertion, résilience, emploi”](#) (online), GRET.
- > [“Scaling demand-driven training programs : a framework”](#) (online), Making Cents International, The Rockefeller Foundation, March 2017.
- > [“The Community enterprise that's creating new possibilities in the DRC”](#) (online), IDEO.ORG.
- > [“The UPSHIFT Approach”](#) (online), UNICEF.

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Page 1: Young citizen reporters project in Senegal.