FORMATION OF SOCIAL COMPETENCIES OF A UNIVERSITY STUDENTS:
A HOLISTIC EXPLORATION

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into the intricate landscape of social competency development within the university context, aiming to unravel the diverse influences that shape students' interpersonal skills. Our primary research question examines the interplay of educational interventions, peer interactions, and extracurricular engagements in the cultivation of social competencies. Employing a mixed-methods research design encompassing surveys, interviews, and observations, the data from a representative and diverse cohort of university students was gathered. The findings unveil a rich tapestry of factors contributing to the multifaceted process of social competency formation, highlighting the nuanced roles of both formal and informal learning environments. The study not only uncovers the challenges hindering social competency development but also identifies promising opportunities for enhancement. This research enriches the academic discourse by providing actionable insights for educators, administrators, and policymakers to design interventions that foster a holistic and socially adept student body. Emphasizing the need for a comprehensive approach to education, this investigation reinforces the importance of recognizing and nurturing the social dimensions of learning within the higher education landscape.

Keywords: *social competencies, University Education, student development, higher education, academic engagement, motivation, holistic learning, faculty-student interaction, extracurricular involvement, cultural competency, inclusive practices, online learning.*

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of higher education is undergoing a paradigm shift where the development of social competencies among university students is increasingly recognized as essential for their holistic growth and success. Social competencies encompass a diverse array of interpersonal skills, including effective communication, teamwork, cultural

competence, and adaptability, which are integral for navigating the complexities of both academic and professional realms. As contemporary workplaces continue to emphasize collaboration and diversity, the acquisition of these competencies becomes not just advantageous but imperative for students transitioning from the university to broader societal contexts.

Numerous studies consistently underscore the importance of social competencies not only for academic achievement but also for long-term career success and overall well-being (Jones, 2018; Wang, Eccles & Kenny, 2013; Durlak et al., 2011). Furthermore, an individual's ability to navigate intricate social environments has been linked to improved mental health outcomes and resilience in the face of challenges (Bowman et al., 2015; Grant et al., 2014). Recognizing the multifaceted nature of social competencies and their far-reaching implications, understanding the processes through which these skills are nurtured during the university years becomes crucial.

Despite the acknowledged importance of social competencies, there is a gap in the total understanding of what kind of specific factors within the university environment contribute to the development of the latest. This research seeks to address this gap by embarking on an exploration of the intricate interplay of educational interventions, peer interactions, and extracurricular engagements in shaping the social competencies of university students. The central research question guiding this study is: How do various factors within the university setting, including digital environments and mental well-being considerations, influence the formation of social competencies among students, and what are the implications for educational practices and policies?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is rooted in the broader literature that highlights the significance of social competencies in various domains. Durlak et al. (2011) conducted a meta-analysis emphasizing the impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning on academic outcomes. Jones (2018) explored the role of soft skills in employability, while Wang, Eccles, and Kenny (2013) delved into individual and gender differences in career choices related to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Additionally, Bowman et al. (2015) examined the effects of race and socioeconomic status on college student's social and academic integration, and Grant, Gino, and Hofmann (2014) investigated the reversal of the extraverted leadership advantage.

Through this research, we aim to contribute not only to the theoretical understanding of social competency formation but also to the practical realm by offering insights that can

inform educational practices and policies. Ultimately, our goal is to facilitate the cultivation of a socially adept and resilient student body, equipping them with the competencies necessary for success in diverse academic and professional contexts.

The exploration of social competencies within university settings is a critical area of study that impacts students' personal, academic, and professional development. This comprehensive literature review synthesizes findings from studies, shedding light on the significance of social competencies in higher education and identifying gaps in the current research. In this regard, examining the motivational aspects of academic activities, Baker and Wigfield (1999) offer insights into the foundational role of motivation in shaping students' engagement and achievement, but in this work, authors mostly concentrated on the university students' motivational aspects. Those can either come from within the student or from outside. The interconnected dimensions of education emphasize the holistic development of students, underlining the need for a balanced approach that includes social competencies (Wang, Eccles & Kenny, 2013; Cohen, 2006).

Still, it is extremely important within this scope to look at the educational setting as a source of enabling student communication. Eccles and Roeser's (2011) study on schools as developmental contexts provides insights into how educational environments contribute to the social competency development of adolescents, particularly within university settings. They have examined students' metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive regulation while doing school work or homework and their self-regulated learning style regarding the four different types of behavioural regulation: external, introjected, identified and intrinsic; at the same time, point of interest was also the role of metacognition in self-regulated learning style, and in the impact of self-regulated learning style on performance expectations, and subsequent performance in the school subjects of language, mathematics and physical education (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Since the conducted research was quantitative, it is quite different to find the answers to the question but rather to see the importance outlined by the participants. For example, metacognition explained a small percentage of the variance of both performance expectations, beyond self-regulatory style, and performance, beyond the interactive effect of performance expectations and regulatory learning style, in both language and mathematics, while it had no significant unique contribution in physical education (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). That was quite an interesting article, but still, it was not that much directed to the research question of the current study.

Conversely, other researchers discuss the identification of high-impact educational practices that form a framework for understanding how certain practices contribute to student learning and the development of social competencies, as well as reflect the

relationship between character strengths and academic success, providing insights into the role of character development in overall student competence (Kuh, 2009; Lounsbury, Fisher, Levy & Welsh, 2009; Jones, 2018).

Pascarella and Terenzini's comprehensive review offers an extensive understanding of the multifaceted ways in which college experiences influence students, including the development of social competencies (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The results of this study are quite interesting as they provide a clear picture of how undergraduate education may impact student development. The findings of a large number of studies are synthesized and discussed here, and the book thus provides an important contribution to the field of higher education studies and student affairs. Moreover, for professionals involved in student affairs and others responsible for student learning, the book provides a starting point to decide how and where to focus their attention and practice in relation to improving the attainment of particular college outcomes (Pascarella & Terenzin, 2005).

Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) emphasize the influential role of faculty in student learning and engagement, underscoring the significance of positive faculty-student interactions in social competency development. Here, the authors outline the faculty's role and importance while reflecting on the student's socialization. That is quite an important point for this study indeed.

Looking at the available sources of the literature, it becomes obvious that the conducted review provides valuable insights into the significance of social competencies in university or overall educational settings with sufficient constructive facts and gaps. First, there is a need for more longitudinal studies tracking the long-term impact of social competency development on not only students' university life but also post-university life. Additionally, the role of technology in shaping social competencies, especially in the context of online and hybrid learning environments, remains an underexplored area.

This comprehensive literature review provides a foundation for understanding the multifaceted nature of social competencies in university settings, offering insights into current knowledge and highlighting avenues for future research.

Taking into consideration the conducted literature review as well as the main interest of the current study, the research question is formulated as follows: *How do various factors within the university setting, including digital environments and mental well-being considerations, influence the formation of social competencies among students, and what are the implications for educational practices and policies?*

METHODOLOGY

The current study employs a mixed-methods research design incorporating surveys, interviews, and observations. The diverse sampling of university students ensures a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and perspectives that contribute to social competency development. By investigating the dynamic relationship between formal educational strategies, informal peer interactions, and participation in extracurricular activities, we aim to provide nuanced insights into the intricate processes shaping social competencies in the university context.

To investigate the formation of social competencies among university students and the influencing factors within the university setting, a mixed-methods approach was employed. This allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the phenomenon, combining quantitative data for statistical analysis and qualitative data for in-depth insights.

Participants

The study engaged a diverse sample of Khachatur Abovian Armenian State Pedagogical University (ASPU) students from various disciplines, ensuring representation across different academic levels and demographic backgrounds. A stratified random sampling method was utilized to select participants, considering factors such as academic major, gender, and year of study. Total number of participants is 400.

Data collection

Surveys were administered to gather quantitative data on social competencies and associated factors. The survey instrument was adapted from validated scales used in previous research on social competencies in educational settings. Likert-scale questions assessed self-reported levels of social competencies, while demographic questions provided information on participants' academic background and extracurricular involvement.

To capture nuanced perspectives and experiences related to social competencies, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of participants. The interview protocol was designed to elicit narratives about participants' interactions within the university, the role of educational strategies, peer relationships, and the impact of extracurricular activities on their social competencies.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using statistical software to identify patterns, correlations, and trends. Descriptive statistics provided an overview of participants' self-reported social competencies, while inferential statistics, such as regression analysis, examined relationships between various factors and social competency outcomes.

Qualitative data from interviews were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis.

Emerging themes were identified, coded, and categorized to provide a rich understanding of the factors influencing social competency development. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings facilitated a comprehensive interpretation of the research question.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were briefed on their right to withdraw from the study at any point. The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the university's ethics review board.

The mixed-methods approach employed in this study allowed for a thorough exploration of the formation of social competencies among university students, by combining quantitative insights into self-reported competencies with qualitative narratives, the research aimed to provide a holistic understanding of the intricate processes shaping social competencies within the university setting.

RESULTS

The quantitative analysis aimed to assess self-reported levels of social competencies among the sampled university students and identify any significant associations with demographic variables and extracurricular involvement. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data, and inferential statistics, such as regression analysis, were employed to explore relationships.

Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics of Self-Reported Social Competencies.

Competency Area	Mean Score (Out of 5)	Standard Deviation
Communication Skills	4.2	0.6
Teamwork	3.8	0.7
Cultural Competence	4.0	0.5
Adaptability	4.1	0.8

The results indicate that, on average, participants reported high levels of social competencies across all areas, with communication skills receiving the highest mean score. The relatively low standard deviations suggest a degree of consistency in self-assessments.

Table 2.

Regression Analysis of Social Competencies and Demographic Variables.

Predictor Variable	Beta Coefficient	p-value
Gender (Male vs. Female)	0.15	0.042
Academic Major (STEM vs. Humanities)	-0.12	0.071

The regression analysis revealed a statistically significant association between gender and social competencies, with females reporting slightly higher competencies on average. Academic majors also demonstrated a trend, with STEM students reporting slightly lower competencies compared to their humanities counterparts.

FINDINGS

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings revealed a nuanced understanding of social competency formation. While the quantitative data offered insights into overall competency levels and associations with demographic variables, qualitative narratives provided depth and context, highlighting the role of educational strategies and extracurricular activities.

The findings suggest that a combination of educational strategies, peer interactions, and extracurricular engagements contributes to the development of social competencies among university students. The mixed-methods approach enriched the research outcomes by providing a comprehensive view of the intricate processes at play within the university setting.

The qualitative findings from the semi-structured interviews provided rich insights into the experiences and perceptions of participants regarding the factors influencing their social competencies. The qualitative data analyses revealed the following themes:

Theme 1: **Educational Strategies** - Participants emphasized the importance of interactive and collaborative learning environments, highlighting specific courses and teaching methodologies that enhanced their communication and teamwork skills.

Theme 2: **Peer Interactions** - Peer relationships were identified as significant contributors to social competency development. Engaging in group projects, study groups, and participating in student organizations were cited as valuable experiences.

Theme 3: **Extracurricular Activities** - Participants discussed the positive impact of extracurricular activities on their adaptability and cultural competence. Involvement in clubs, sports, and community service provided opportunities for diverse interactions.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study shed light on the formation of social competencies among university students, addressing the research question: "How do various factors within the university setting, including digital environments and mental well-being considerations, influence the formation of social competencies among students, and what are the implications for educational practices and policies?"

The quantitative findings indicated that participants, on average, reported high levels of social competencies, with communication skills ranking the highest. The regression analysis identified associations between social competencies and demographic variables, revealing that females tended to report slightly higher competencies, and there was a trend suggesting differences between STEM and humanities majors. These findings align with some existing literature, such as the emphasis on communication skills (Jones, 2018) and the influence of gender on career choices (Wang, Eccles, & Kenny, 2013).

Qualitative themes provided a deeper understanding of the factors influencing social competencies. Educational strategies, peer interactions, and extracurricular activities emerged as crucial components. This aligns with existing literature that emphasizes the role of peer interactions (Eccles & Roeser, 2011) and the impact of extracurricular activities on cultural competence (Durlak et al., 2011).

While the findings of the current research corroborate existing literature on the importance of peer interactions and extracurricular activities, the nuanced insights from our study add specificity to the understanding of how these factors operate within the university setting. The exploration of educational strategies as a contributing factor provides a novel contribution to the literature, emphasizing the need for interactive and collaborative learning environments.

IMPLICATIONS

The study's implications extend to both educational practices and policies. Firstly, educators should consider incorporating interactive teaching methodologies that promote communication and teamwork skills. Peer interactions, facilitated through group projects and study groups, should be encouraged to enhance social competencies. Extracurricular activities play a pivotal role, suggesting that universities should provide diverse opportunities for students to engage outside the classroom.

In terms of policies, the study suggests a need for a holistic approach to fostering social competencies, acknowledging the interplay of various factors. Institutions should consider the diverse needs of students from different majors and backgrounds, tailoring

interventions accordingly. Furthermore, the study advocates for the integration of social competency development into the broader curriculum.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH IMPLEMENTATION

In summary, this study contributes valuable insights into the formation of social competencies among university students. The mixed-methods approach provided a comprehensive understanding, blending quantitative assessments with qualitative narratives. The findings underscore the importance of educational strategies, peer interactions, and extracurricular activities in shaping social competencies.

Furthermore, more research is needed on the intersectionality of social competencies, considering how factors such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status influence their development. Lastly, a comprehensive framework that integrates various dimensions of social competencies and assesses their effectiveness in different cultural and institutional contexts is essential for guiding future educational practices.

Looking to the future, there are several avenues for further research. Firstly, longitudinal studies could explore the long-term impact of social competency development on academic and career outcomes. Additionally, investigations into the effectiveness of specific educational interventions and the role of technology in social competency development in the digital age would be beneficial. Lastly, comparative studies across different cultural and institutional contexts can deepen our understanding of the universality of social competency formation.

This research may be a foundation for continued exploration and refinement of strategies to enhance social competencies among university students, contributing to the broader goal of preparing them for success in an increasingly interconnected and collaborative world.

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