OXFORD

# The Australian student voice on the soft skills needed for the future

## And how universities can integrate these skills into their teaching

November 2020

# CONTENTS

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In a fast-evolving 21st century, it is becoming increasingly important for students to develop their soft skill competencies alongside the technical skills required for their career. In 2016, the World Economic Forum advised which soft skills would be most needed in 2020. This paper reviews the findings from a survey of Australian higher education students on which of these skills they believe to be the most important for future career success. It also consults eight academic experts on the importance of these skills, and how universities can integrate them into their courses and teaching.

The key findings of this paper are that 88% of Australian students believe soft skills are necessary for their future career and 78% agree that soft skills will give them an advantage in the changing workforce due to technological automation. The top three soft skills Australian students believe are most needed for career success are:

- **Complex problem solving,**
- **Critical thinking and**
- **Creativity.**

Although already necessary, it is predicted that the importance of these soft skills will increase as technology development causes a displacement of some jobs. As more and more employers are seeking to employ graduates with a wide soft skills portfolio, it is crucial that educators integrate the teaching of these soft skills into their courses. Universities need to complement the teaching of technical skills with that of soft skills to ensure they are creating 'work-ready' graduates who can confidently apply themselves in a competitive job market.

Our academic experts offer their views on why these soft skills are important along with their recommendations on how they can be integrated into university teaching. One recommendation is to take a scaffolded approach to developing students' ability to think critically about the world. Another is to embrace the concept of 'facilitating learning' which focuses on how the thought processes and behaviours associated with a skill become evident to students. Our experts also recommend different ways to put these skills into practice including:

- **Three steps to becoming a successful critical thinker**
- **Four practical scenarios and reflection questions to help health-care students become more 'creative' and effective communicators**
- **Five strategies to help education students develop their complex problem solving skills.**

There are many different approaches which can be taken to integrate soft skill development into teaching. It is recommended that whichever approach is chosen, the teaching of soft skills is embedded throughout all university courses so that students gain trust in their own learning behaviours and develop the confidence needed to employ these skills after graduation.

# THE EXPERTS CONSULTED FOR THIS PAPER

## PROFESSOR MATTHEW ALLEN

Professor Matthew Allen is an Adjunct Professor in the Institute for Social Change at the University of Tasmania. He was previously Head of School, Communication and Creative Arts at Deakin University and prior to that a Professor of Internet Studies at Curtin University. A nationally awarded educator (AAUT, 2000) and Fellow of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council, Professor Allen has extensive experience in leading and developing innovations in online learning. Professor Allen is the author of *Smart Thinking: Skills for Critical Understanding and Writing.*

## ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR JUDITH DINHAM

Associate Professor Judith Dinham is the Director of Learning and Teaching in the School of Education at Curtin University. She has held senior university teaching and leadership positions in arts education and artists' education over several decades. She is a HERDSA Fellow and holds an Edith Cowan University Fellowship for Teaching Excellence. Associate Professor Dinham is lead-author of *It's Arts Play: Young Children Belonging, Being and Becoming through the Arts.*

## PROFESSOR AMANDA HENDERSON

Professor Amanda Henderson is a Nursing Director at Metro South Health, Queensland and Professor at Central Queensland University and University of Queensland. She has led the development and adoption of an Australian Nursing Standards Assessment Tool (ANSAT) and an Australian Midwifery Standards Assessment Tool (AMSAT) that are used by universities across Australia to assess students' clinical performance during their placement. Professor Henderson is the author of *Communication for Health Care Practice.*.

## MARY KAVANAGH

Mary Kavanagh has extensive classroom teaching and leadership experience in the areas of school administration, literacy coordination, student diversity and the induction of early career teachers. Mary's expertise is in the challenges of EAL schools and the designing of learning and social or emotional support plans for students with special learning needs. A focus of her work has been the development of close relationships between the school and parents or carers of students with additional needs. Mary is co-author of *Preparing for the Teaching Profession.*

## DR MICHAEL KAVANAGH

Dr Michael Kavanagh is an academic adviser to the Internship Program of the Master of Teaching Degree (Primary and Secondary) at Deakin University. Dr Kavanagh has published widely in literacy education and has worked extensively in teacher education and school administration. Dr Kavanagh is co-author of *Preparing for the Teaching Profession*.

## EMERITUS PROFESSOR COLIN MACDOUGALL

Colin MacDougall is Emeritus Professor of Public Health at Flinders University with a strong commitment to social justice. He has taught and developed public health at bachelor's, master's and doctoral levels and in medicine at Flinders University and internationally. Professor MacDougall was an inaugural Executive Member of the Southgate Institute for Health, Society and Equity and holds honorary appointments at the University of Melbourne in the Child and Community Wellbeing Unit, Centre for Health Equity and the University of Pokhara in Nepal. He is co-editor of *Understanding Health,* due to publish in its fifth edition in 2021.

## DR ALEXIA MADDOX

Dr Alexia Maddox is a Lecturer in Communication at Deakin University. She has a background as a sociologist of technology and her research interests include the social impacts of technology, such as social media and digital networked technologies. Dr Maddox is the author of the accompanying student resources to the fifth edition of *Making the Grade: A Guide to Successful Study and Professional Communication,* due to publish in 2021.

## DR MICHELLE SANSON

Dr Michelle Sanson teaches Human Rights Law between her work on human rights protection in conflict and disaster contexts, presently in Myanmar. She served for three years as Senior Lecturer and First Year Coordinator for the School of Law at Western Sydney University. Prior to that she was a law academic at the University of Technology, Sydney, holding a variety of roles, including Director of Undergraduate Programs and coach of award-winning moot teams. Dr Sanson is author of *Statutory Interpretation,* second edition and co-author of *Connecting with Law,* fourth edition.

# INTRODUCTION

It has never been more important to address the skills that students are learning at university. Every job needs a combination of technical and soft skills, and organisations are starting to recognise that soft skills are essential to successful business performance[1]. As our future generation of workers, it is critical that today's students are learning both the technical skills of their profession and the soft skills needed to support their success.

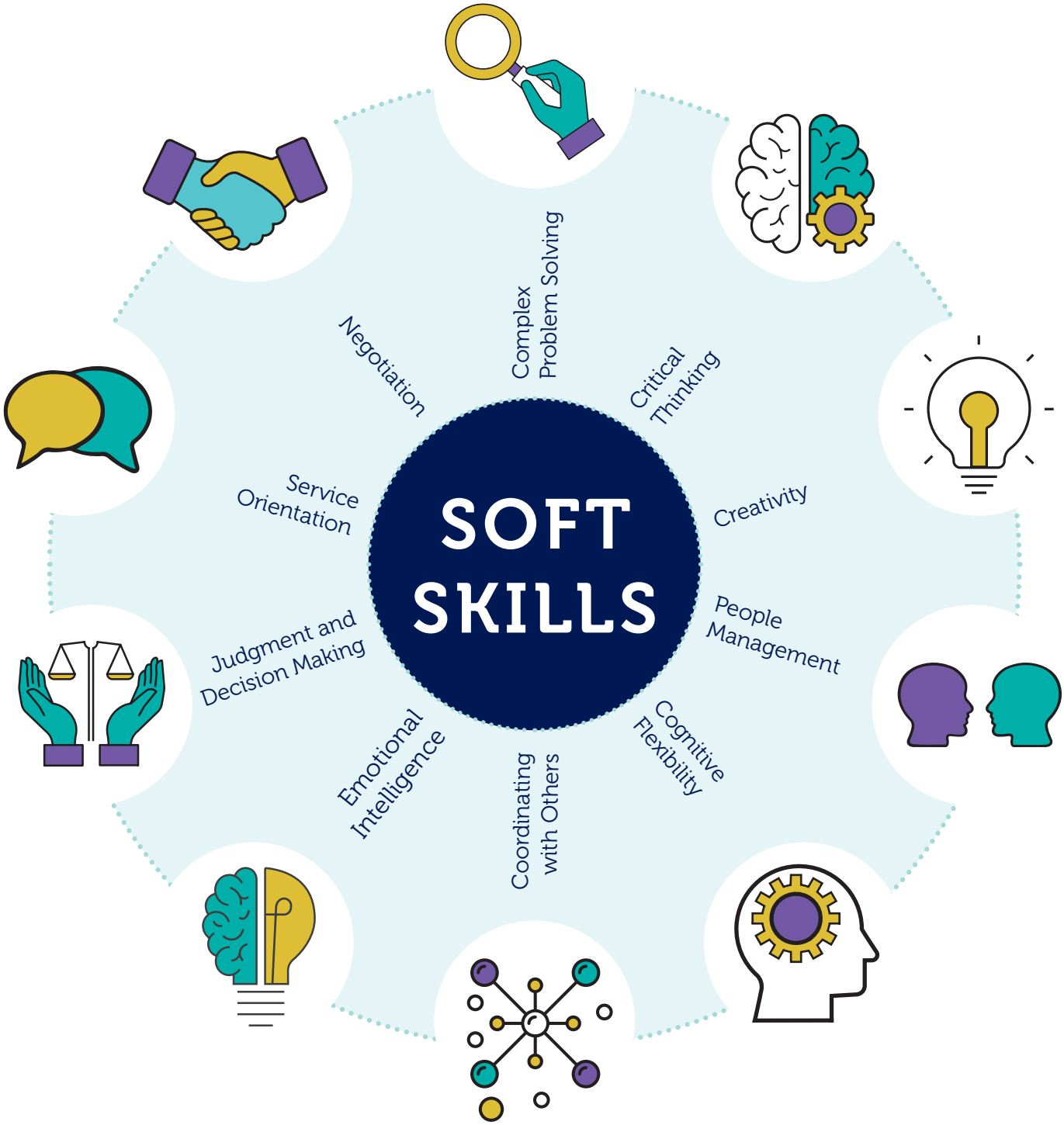
The 2018 World Economic Forum *Future of Jobs Report* predicted that, 'by 2022…machines and algorithms will have on average increased their contribution to specific tasks by 57%', leading to the displacement of some jobs, but the creation of others in their place[2]. Although the learning of new technologies will still be important, the skills equation will shift, with increased importance given to the value of soft skills. Moreover, it is predicted that by 2030, two thirds of Australian jobs will be focused on soft skills[3].

According to Harvard University Associate Professor David Deming, the need now is for educators to complement their teaching of technical skills with that of soft skills to ensure graduates have the relevant skills they need to compete in a new job market[4]. Drawing on findings from a survey of 1000 students conducted by Oxford University Press, this paper reviews student perceptions of what soft skills they believe they need for future success and consults eight academic experts on the importance of these skills, and how universities can integrate the teaching of these skills into their courses.

1. DeakinCo. & Deloitte Access Economics, 2019, *Premium Skills: The Wage Premium Associated with Human Skills* report, 3
2. World Economic Forum, 2018, *The Future of Jobs Report*, 8 & 11
3. DeakinCo. & Deloitte Access Economics, 2019, *Premium Skills: The Wage Premium Associated with Human Skills* report, 4
4. Torkington, S, 'The jobs of the future – and two skills you need to get them', World Economic Forum, 2 September 2016

# WHAT ARE SOFT SKILLS?

Technical skills are the practical knowledge and expertise required to perform actions, tasks and processes of a job. Soft skills are unique human traits and attributes that are difficult to replace with technology. The World Economic Forum[5] defined the top 10 skills needed in 2020 as:




**Source:** Illustration adapted from Gray, A, 'The 10 skills you need to thrive in the Fourth Industrial Revolution', World Economic Forum , 19 January 2016

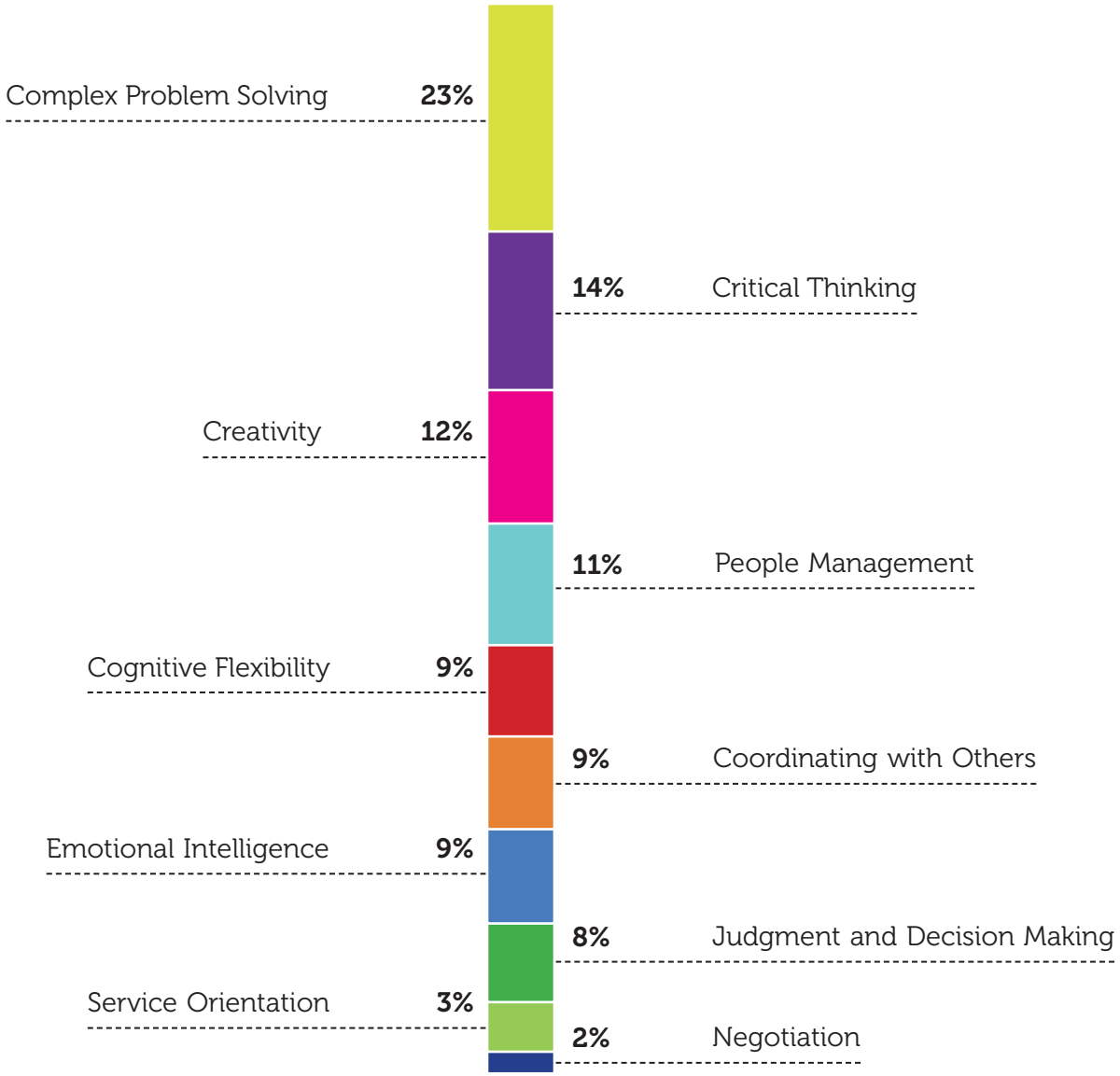
5: Gray, A, 'The 10 skills you need to thrive in the Fourth Industrial Revolution', World Economic Forum , 19 January 2016

# WHICH SOFT SKILLS ARE PERCEIVED AS THE MOST IMPORTANT BY AUSTRALIAN STUDENTS?

Every job needs a combination of soft and technical soft skills, but which soft skills do Australian students think are the most important for their future career? A 2019 Oxford University Press survey[6] revealed 88% of students believe soft skills are necessary for their future career with 78% agreeing that soft skills will give them an advantage in the changing workforce due to technological automation. The top 3 skills nominated by Australian students as the most needed for career success are complex problem solving, critical thinking and creativity.

In order to remain relevant, future graduates will need to continually re-assess and update their skills portfolio[7]. Our survey showed that 90% of students agree that although soft skills are needed to secure a job, they also believe that they will need to upskill during their professional life. According to 38% of students this will be an ongoing practice and 20% think upskilling will be required once every 6 months in order to support their career.

## The Australian student view on the soft skills needed for career success



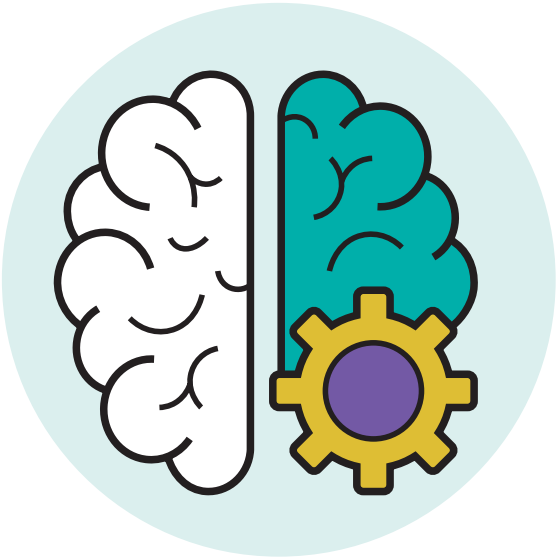

**Source:** Oxford University Press survey, 2019

6. Oxford University Press Survey, 2019, n=1000
7. DeakinCo. & Deloitte Access Economics, 2019, *Premium Skills: The Wage Premium Associated with Human Skills* report, 3

## The 3 soft skills Australian students believe they most need for career success

### COMPLEX PROBLEM SOLVING

Finding a solution to unusual, multi-dimensional problems in complex, real-world settings[8].



### CRITICAL THINKING

Using logic and reasoning to question an issue, consider various outcomes of that issue, and consider the positives and negatives of each approach[8].

### CREATIVITY

Looking at unrelated information, 'connecting the dots' and presenting a new, innovative idea from this information[8].

8. McIntyre, A, '10 skills you need for future employment', PwC Australia

# OUR EXPERTS DISCUSS THE 3 MOST NEEDED SOFT SKILLS

## What are these skills?

Our team of expert academics comment on what complex problem solving, critical thinking and creativity mean to them and the importance of these skills for future success.

Professor and Nursing Director, Amanda Henderson, explains that "soft skills encompass all the skills that are not easily defined, difficult to distil into their component parts or differentiate from each other. Complex problem solving, critical thinking, and creativity are not mutually exclusive or readily distinguishable in professional working life, but these characteristics are highly sought after by employers as the nature of work becomes increasingly dynamic, fluid and novel."

Let's look at each of these skills in more detail.

*88% of students believe soft skills are necessary for their future career*

## COMPLEX PROBLEM SOLVING

### Michael and Mary Kavanagh

When a problem is being caused by a number of factors that need to be understood before a resolution can be considered, then the problem can be classified as 'complex'. Complex problem solving is being able to effectively deal with a range of problems, from relatively straightforward problems, to complicated problems, and finally, those that are the most challenging – complex problems.

### Colin MacDougall

Problem solving begins with the distinction between simple, complex and wicked problems along with the two key elements of understanding the cause and proposing a solution. Problems are simple when most people agree on their cause and solution. They become complex when people can agree on one but not the other. A wicked problem has innumerable causes that often can't be solved with traditional solutions[9]; it often occurs when there is neither agreement on the cause nor the solution of a problem. However, there are different types of 'wickedness'. The term 'ultra-wicked' can be used to describe problems that take us beyond comfort zones and normal expertise. 'Ultra-wicked' is driven by intersecting dimensions of topics such as morality, trust in government, populism, religious extremism, culture, politics and anti-science. An 'ultra-wicked' problem demonstrates the power of deeply held beliefs and values that dispute scientific analyses of cause and solution.

9. Camillus, J, 'Strategy as a Wicked Problem', Harvard Business Review, May 2008

## CRITICAL THINKING

### Matthew Allen

Critical thinking involves uncovering and examining assumptions, using relevant and reliable evidence, and drawing conclusions from that evidence. When assumptions are checked and confirmed, evidence is used, and logic is applied, conclusions are more likely to be right and will, moreover, often be accepted by others as right. Good critical thinkers make strong collaborators and more humble leaders. This mix of confidence and humility defines the kind of flexibility of mind needed to succeed.

### Alexia Maddox

Critical thinking enables understanding of the key issues relating to a topic or task. It is bolstered by identifying the context of these issues through engagement with credible and authoritative sources. Critical thinkers focus their thinking and engage with the problem set in a meaningful and rigorous way.

## CREATIVITY

### Amanda Henderson

Creativity is thinking beyond our sphere of understanding. However, it could also be argued that 'being creative' is merely a positive approach to problem solving. Managing a problem or issue is fundamental to any work context and generally requires an individual to 'think differently' or 'change their perspective'. Being creative ignites our passion to surpass our established patterns of knowing; provides license to explore something that has not been tested, validated or proven; and legitimates trying something new when an impasse is met.

### Judith Dinham

Creativity is a broad concept that can be discussed in terms of characteristic thinking dispositions and behaviours, strategies employed when approaching problems and challenges, or certain characteristics of products and outcomes. At the heart of creativity is invention: the generation of novel outcomes that have value.

> *"society will now be on the lookout for graduates with effective critical thinking skills far more than before and will value them more highly."*
>
> **- Matthew Allen**

## Why are these skills important?

## COMPLEX PROBLEM SOLVING

### Michael and Mary Kavanagh

Sometimes problems can be solved quite simply, but other times problems can escalate if not managed correctly. It's important to be alert to 'signs' of a problem and know how to take steps to resolve the problem before it worsens. Of all the soft skills, this is perhaps the most important skill in the teaching profession, where educators are often working with children, who are on steep learning curves – academically, socially, emotionally, physically and morally.

### Colin MacDougall

It is easy to design university courses and research degrees to equip students to solve simple and complex problems. It is harder to solve the wicked and 'ultra-wicked' problems that impede major ecological and human progress. History tells us that new ideas, new inventions and new ways of thinking do not happen by uncritically rehearsing well-worn roles. All major inventions resulted from revolutionary ways of thinking and challenging orthodoxy; often led by creative, brave and visionary individuals and teams who overcame criticism.

## CRITICAL THINKING

### Michelle Sanson

Critical thinking is one of the most important skills necessary for future careers and for life in general. With the rise of social media resulting in the unregulated proliferation of misinformation, people need to have critical thinking skills to assess the source of the information and its likely validity. When decisions are being made, a critical thinker will easily discard some information in favour of more reliable sources.

### Matthew Allen

Critical thinking is the foundation of all knowledge work, particularly when that work involves developing new ideas and approaches, or dealing with uncertainty. Future professional careers will not be governed by pre-existing practices and procedures that can be followed, but more so involve graduates inventing new ways of doing things that are correct and lead to improvement.

This skill is already essential, however, the COVID-19 pandemic has instantly and widely demonstrated that, when a crisis disrupts business as usual, we cannot move forward without critical thinking. Therefore, our society will now be on the lookout for graduates with effective critical thinking skills far more than before and will value them more highly.

> *"In a dynamic world, being amenable to imagining alternatives, playfully exploring, and generating solutions, is an asset in all aspects of life."*
>
> **- Judith Dinham**

### Alexia Maddox

Critical thinking is valuable for future careers as it enables graduates to make contributions to projects and tasks in a way that is targeted, efficient, informed and insightful. It may take the form of lateral thinking (connecting ideas in a novel way) or the strategic focusing of attention (knowing what to focus on, when and why) but both attributes are valuable in the workplace. COVID-19 has increased the need for a business to be able to innovate rapidly and pivot their business models. An employee who can both recognise opportunities and respond to new circumstances is essential.

## CREATIVITY

### Amanda Henderson

Creativity is central to the work of graduates and is highly desired and actively sought. When communicating, traditional conversation prompts are taught, for example 'Are you okay?', 'How is your day going?', or 'How can I assist you?'. However, during more challenging communication situations or when trying to 'enter' another person's world, a more creative approach might be needed. For example, in a health care setting, this might be sitting with someone and drawing, or turning on music and starting to dance – using creativity to stretch the boundaries of conventional practice.

### Judith Dinham

In this era, creative thinking has come into focus because we face many unfamiliar challenges that demand new paradigms and unusual solutions. In a dynamic world, being amenable to imagining alternatives, playfully exploring, and generating solutions, is an asset in all aspects of life.

## How can universities integrate the most needed soft skills into their teaching?

A university's role in society is to produce and disseminate new knowledge but they also have a responsibility to create 'work-ready' graduates[10]. There is an increasing expectation that employers expect graduates to be competent in a range of soft skills.

Student expectations are also becoming more closely aligned to the desires of their potential employers and they are making study decisions that not only focus on grades, but also on the competencies they will need upon graduation[11].

Survey results revealed 43% of students agree that their university values and supports the development of soft skills. So how do universities integrate the learning of these skills into their teaching?

### COMPLEX PROBLEM SOLVING

#### Michael and Mary Kavanagh

Proactive preparation plays a big part in the development of complex problem solving skills. Whilst a recent graduate may demonstrate significant soft skills, including problem solving skills and the associated capacity to work collaboratively and show flexibility and diligence, that does not mean that they appreciate the nature of the challenges that come with solving more complex problems. Several strategies can be implemented to assist students in their readiness for these situations, including role play, reflective practice, and teaching them a range of problem solving strategies.

#### Colin MacDougall

Students need to experience success solving simple and complex problems as they build their career. Future career satisfaction is increased when students are able to extend their research skills beyond disciplinary boundaries to tackle seemingly insurmountable problems. Researchers and research-active academics need to provide examples of overcoming adversity and complexity to inspire and bring out the best in students. Graduates with the art and science of problem solving contribute more to their employers when they have the intellectual, interpersonal and theoretical skills to solve problems that are complex, wicked and 'ultra-wicked'.

> *"the life-long skill of being able to think critically about the world and engage with professional and public life in an informed and open manner."*
>
> **- Alexia Maddox**

10. PwC and AHEIA, 2015, *Australian Higher Education Workforce of the Future* report, 16 & 17
11. PwC and AHEIA, 2015, *Australian Higher Education Workforce of the Future* report, 13

## CRITICAL THINKING

### Michelle Sanson

Teaching critical thinking requires experiential activity, which drives home to students the way information can be misinterpreted and misused, reinforces why the skill matters, and motivates them to develop the skill. In order to reinforce and normalise the skill, it then needs to be replicated through all core subjects at university so that students can readily and confidently continue to use this skill after graduation.

### Matthew Allen

Rather than focusing on transferring knowledge, teaching needs to put more emphasis on enabling students to learn. If we step away from teaching and look at the concept of 'facilitating learning', then we need to make the thought processes, evidence gathering, and logical operations of critical thinking evident to students. Our design of learning should prioritise a managed transition from semi- to largely independent thinking by students in which they become conscious of what they are doing as they develop as critical thinkers.

### Alexia Maddox

Teaching and learning within the higher education system is built upon a foundation of facilitating students' ability to conceptualise phenomena and apply knowledge. Universities take a scaffolded approach to developing students' abilities to access, evaluate, synthesise and interpret credible and authoritative information and evidence. These skills can be applied in the world beyond university and perhaps the greatest value universities offer to students (other than credentialing) is an extension of their networks and the life-long skill of being able to think critically about the world and engage with professional and public life in an informed and open manner.

*"The university has a role in cultivating the dispositions, or habits of mind, that are conducive to agile, playful and divergent thinking."*

**- Judith Dinham**

## CREATIVITY

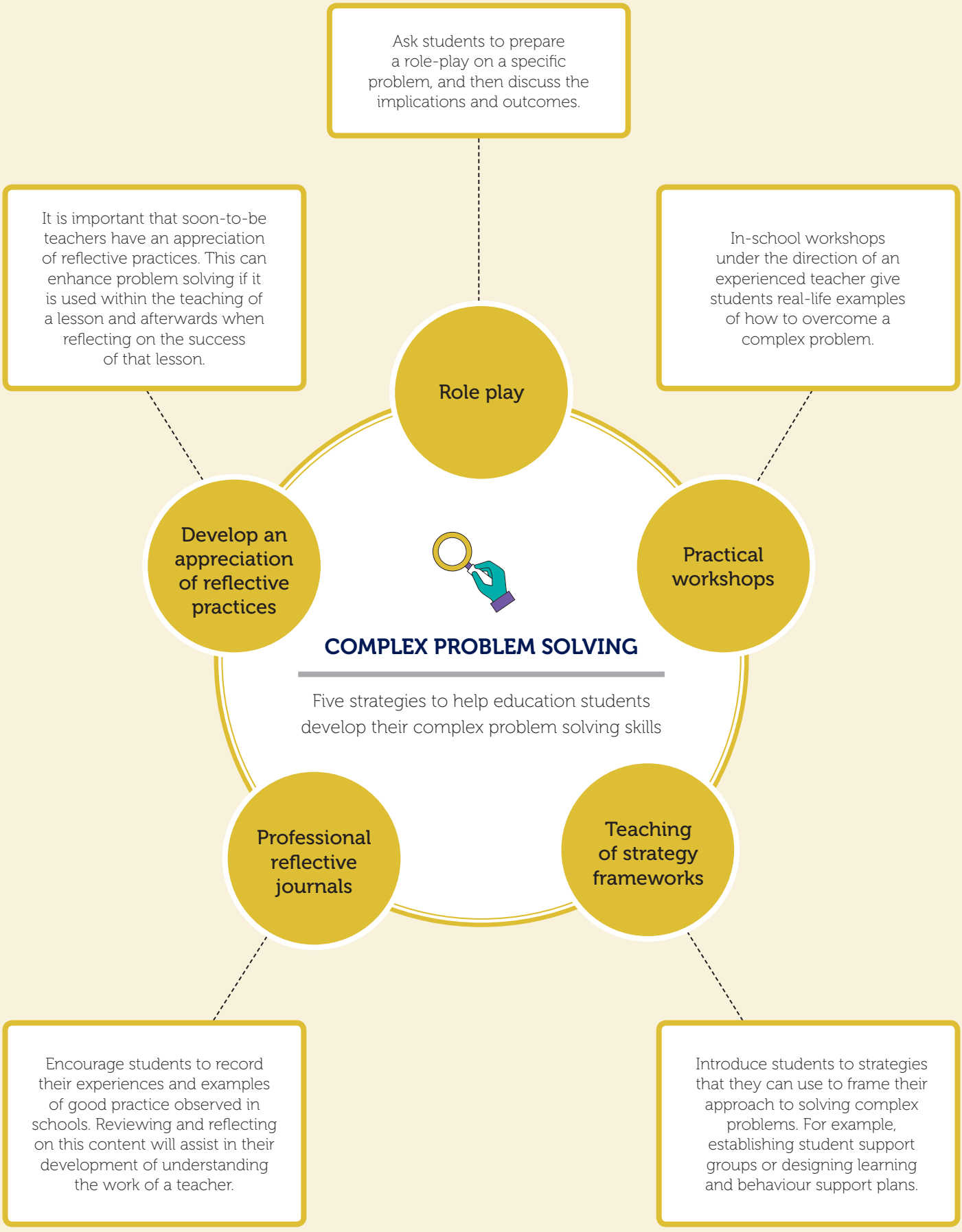
### Amanda Henderson

A critical element from a teaching and learning perspective is legitimating or giving licence to exploration beyond standard convention. While creativity is essential it needs to be informed and guided. It is crucial to have clarity and understanding of the context so that being creative always remains respectful. Creativity can be challenging to 'teach', however encouraging students to reflect on their experiences or real-life scenarios encourages them to explore their thoughts and feelings and constructively analyse how they might best approach a situation.

### Judith Dinham

The university has a role in cultivating the dispositions, or habits of mind, that are conducive to agile, playful and divergent thinking. Through learning experiences that pose open-ended challenges, or invite solutions to real world problems, students have the opportunity to develop, and trust, the learning behaviours that creativity requires.

# How to teach soft skills in practice




**Source:** Adapted from *Preparing for the Teaching Profession* by Mary and Michael Kavanagh.

## CRITICAL THINKING

**Matthew Allen**

**Three steps to becoming a successful critical thinker:**

A good critical thinker consistently does three things when they try to 'think through' an issue and arrive at a justified, well-understood conclusion (whether that conclusion is knowledge, a decision, a solution to a problem, or a defensible moral or political stance). For students to become successful critical thinkers, they must follow these steps:

### 1 Challenge assumptions

Actively and consistently examine their own and others' assumptions. Assumptions strongly influence our thinking and if they are not valid or relevant, they can lead us to wrong conclusions.

### 2 Use reliable evidence

Seek out, judge and use relevant and reliable evidence, whether original data or secondary knowledge from others, so that their thinking is informed by and tested against the outside world.

### 3 Apply logic

Use logical operations to join individual claims about the world (what we might term facts) so that the relationship between one claim and the other is more than just additive, but also builds to a conclusion whose authority and power rests on the quality of the argument behind it.

## CREATIVITY

**Amanda Henderson**

**Four practical scenarios and reflection questions to help health-care students become more 'creative' and effective communicators:**

### 1 Achieving consensus

- What are my client's goals? How can I best learn about and understand these goals?
- Do I have a pre-conceived idea with respect to client care and goals?
- Does my goal fit with others? Am I likely to reach a consensus?

### 2 Coordinating care

- Which health professionals are involved in my client's care? Do I know all the health professionals that attend to my client? How can I find this information?
- Am I familiar with the information that health professionals share with my client? What mechanisms are in place for the different health professionals to communicate? Are these mechanisms effective? Why or why not?
- Are there particular people or processes that are instrumental in the coordination of care?

### 3 Collaborative decision making

- How are options best decided?
- How should clients and families communicate with health care teams?
- Should conversations be conducted separately based on the content of the conversation, or should the teams present as a collective? Clinicians can be concerned about breaches of privacy with clients being discussed in a team environment. How would you address this concern?

### 4 Managing conflict

- Have you observed situations in the care of a client where opinions have been divided?
- How were these differences resolved?
- Who had the legitimate authority to make the decision?
- Did the person or team with legitimate authority make the decision? If so, were aspects of the differing views in any way accommodated?

**Source:** Adapted from *Communication for Health Care Practice* by Amanda Henderson.

# CONCLUSION

As the importance of soft skills for the future workforce increases, the need to integrate these skills into student learning is essential for success and employment after graduation. With technological advancements, the skills equation will shift even further causing soft skills to become even more significant. Although the technical skills of a profession remain important, more and more employers are seeking to employ graduates with a wide soft skills portfolio. Educators need to complement their teaching of technical skills with soft skills, creating graduates who can confidently compete and succeed in a new job market.

Australian students believe soft skills are necessary for their future career and understand that regular up-skilling will be required to remain relevant in their profession. The top three soft skills Australian students believe they need for career success are complex problem solving, critical thinking and creativity.

Universities play a key role in the development of these skills and have a responsibility to create 'work-ready' graduates. This paper has spoken to why these skills are important, and a range of experts have discussed the different approaches that can be taken to integrate development of these skills into teaching. There are different ways to do this, including taking a scaffolded approach, the concept of 'facilitating learning' or the use of practical strategies. Whichever approach is taken, these skills need to be replicated through all courses so that students gain trust in their own learning behaviours and develop the confidence needed to employ these skills after graduation.

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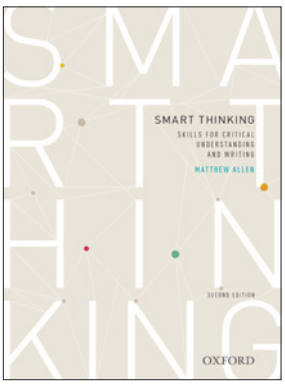
World Economic Forum, 2018, *The Future of Jobs Report*


# SURVEY METHODOLOGY

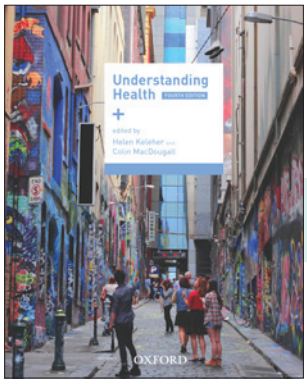
In October 2019, Oxford University Press Australia commissioned an independent research partner, E2E Research Services, to conduct an online survey of 1000 Australian higher education undergraduates and recent graduates (within the previous two years). The survey used a combination of multiple choice and Likert scale questions.

# OXFORD TEXTBOOKS BY OUR CONTRIBUTING ACADEMICS




### Smart Thinking: Skills for Critical Understanding and Writing

Second Edition
Matthew Allen

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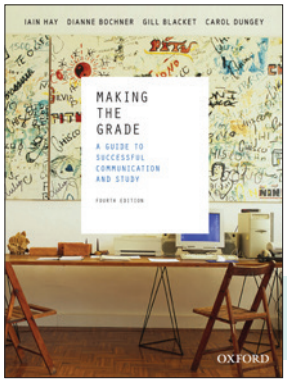
Judith Dinham
and Beryl Chalk

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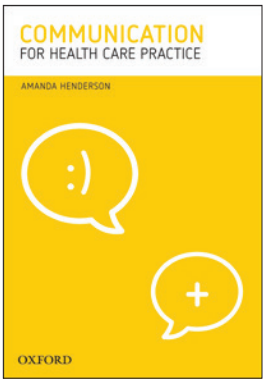
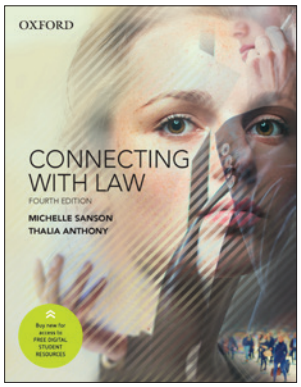
Iain Hay, Dianne Bochner, Gill Blacket and Carol Dungey

New edition coming in 2021




### Communication for Health Care Practice

Amanda Henderson

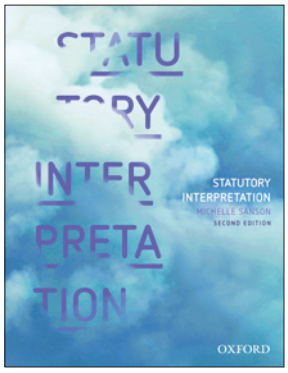



### Connecting with Law

Fourth Edition
Michelle Sanson and Thalia Anthony


### Preparing for the Teaching Profession

Mary Kavanagh and Michael Kavanagh




### Statutory Interpretation

Second Edition
Michelle Sanson

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