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## **MECHANISMS FOR THE INTEGRATION OF SOFT SKILLS, VOLUNTEERING, AND STUDENTS' SOCIAL GPA AT THE UNIVERSITY**

**Abstract:** The article examines the mechanisms for integrating soft skills, volunteering, and university students' social GPA. The authors analyze specific features of each concepts and based on identifying their interrelation, propose recommendations for implementing the research results into practical application of social GPA in Kazakhstan universities. They suppose that the findings of the study could be used to improve legal and regulatory framework for scaling up the pilot project on assessing student achievements, taking into account the Integrated GPA (IGPA).

The article's aim is to identify the mechanisms for integrating soft skills, volunteering, and students' social GPA. To achieve this goal, following objectives were solved: 1) to establish the correlation between the concepts of "soft skills" and "volunteering" and their interrelation; 2) to determine the role of soft skills within the criteria system of students' social GPA; 3) to propose recommendations to the scientific and academic community of Kazakhstan regarding the integration of three phenomena under consideration.

The results obtained in the course of solving the objectives allowed authors to conclude that students' volunteering acts as a socio-pedagogical platform for soft skills development, the combination of which has a significant impact on social GPA level, thereby contributing to students' personal development.

**Keywords:** soft skills, assessment and evaluation of soft skills, student volunteering, social GPA, integrated GPA.

### **Introduction**

At one of the meetings of the Republican Educational and Methodological Council, as a consultative and advisory working body that provides general guidance for the activities of educational and methodological associations in various areas of professional training, one of the highly relevant issues the measurability of university students' personal competencies within the framework of the professional standards of the Republic of Kazakhstan, particularly the professional standard for the "Educator" was discussed. A well-reasoned opinion was expressed that the descriptors of the professional standard in the section on "Personal Competencies" correlate with soft skills. It has been demonstrated that the accompaniment of soft skills ("soft skills include personality traits, sociability, language fluency and personal habits" (Whitmore, 1972)) with hard skills (hard skills include specific competencies or technical skills that can be measured and often validated (Whitmore & Fry, 1974)) benefits many occupational outcomes (Lamri & Lubart, 2023). In their previous research, the authors of this article established that in university-level professional training, there is a clear trend toward a balanced integration of "soft" and "hard" skills. This balance serves as a central concept for the implementation of an integrated student GPA system in Kazakhstan universities, where student volunteering acts as a key criterion within the social GPA component. In connection with the above, this article aims to identify and analyze the

mechanisms for integrating soft skills, volunteering, and the social GPA of university students. To achieve the stated goal, we considered it relevant to solve the following objectives:

to establish the correlation between the concepts of “soft skills” and “volunteering” and their interrelation;

to determine the role of “soft skills” within the criteria system of students' social GPA;

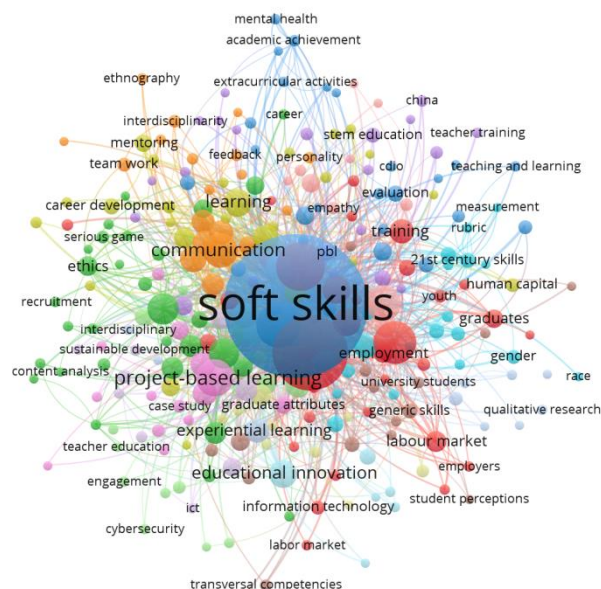
to propose recommendations for the integration of the three examined phenomena to the scientific and academic community of Kazakhstan.

### Methods and organization of research

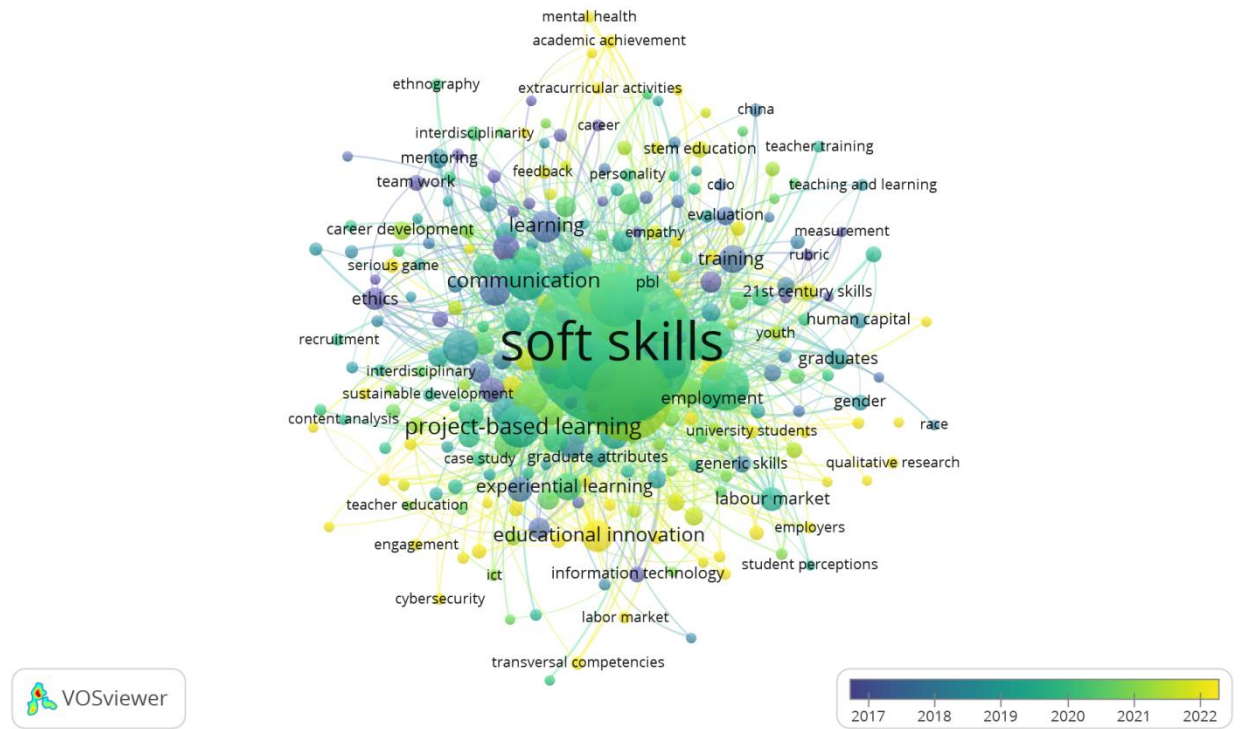
To solve the first objective, methods of theoretical analysis of scientific literature and mapping techniques were applied using the VOSviewer program, which is able to systematize and group key terms into semantic clusters reflecting interest in a specific issue over a selected period of time (Gavrikov & Kosova, 2020), and to provide visualizations of bibliometric networks (Van Eck, 2017). The research was conducted based on the international reference database Scopus using the method of “co-occurrence”, which formed thematic clusters. The program identified five major clusters, which we have conventionally labeled as follows: "Soft Skills" (blue cluster), "Communication" (yellow cluster), "Employment" (red cluster), "Project-Based Learning" (purple cluster), and "Interdisciplinarity" (green cluster). This suggests that the issue of soft skills is associated with a very wide range of scientific research, with the leading direction being education for employment (Figure 1). The bibliometric analysis also showed that researchers showed the greatest interest in this issue in 2020 (Figure 2).

**Figure 1**

*Thematic clusters based on the keyword "soft skills"*



Source: VOSviewer

**Figure 2***Publication activity of researchers on the topic of "soft skills"*

The study of scientific works from available sources indicates that the origin of the term “soft skills” dates back to 1972 and was recorded in reports by the U.S. Army. In this context, the term entered scientific discourse from military and behavioral psychology, as well as military pedagogy. In practical terms, it was actively used in personnel management during the 1980s and 1990s. Since the 2000s, it has been included as a recommended skill set for 21st-century workplaces (OECD – Education 2030; The World Economic Forum, 2020). There is no individual author of the term, but it was presented at the CONARC Conference on Soft Skills Training (1972, Texas), where Paul G. Whitmore delivered a report defining this term as “...important profession-related skills that involve little or no interaction with machines and whose application in the workplace is quite general...” (Whitmore, 1972). Later, he provided a more comprehensive description of the concept in a work co-authored with Fry, J. P. (Whitmore & Fry, 1974). The evolution of the term shows that its introduction into military practice was linked to the implementation of the "System Engineering of Training" doctrine by the U.S. Continental Army Command (U.S. Army, 1968). Despite the absence of a precise scientific definition, the essence of the term is consistently revealed by various authors in a unified manner: the ability of an individual to successfully interact with others (Yan et al., 2019; Talin, n.d.; The World Economic Forum, 2020; Rao et al., 2007; Noah & Aziz, 2020; Morgan, 2024; Abbadia, 2023).

It is also quite interesting that the following concept, as stated in the title of our study “volunteering” also originated within military pedagogy. In particular, in the French language, the term emerged in the 16th century to denote a “volunteer in the army.” Derived from the Latin word *voluntarius*, it means “voluntary” or “carried out by one's own will.” Today, the term has acquired social and civic connotations and is widely used in sociology, social philosophy, and law. The concept of "volunteering" gained official international recognition through the UN and UNESCO in the 1970s, when the need for civic engagement in the form of voluntary public service was formally declared.

A key role in the institutional recognition of volunteering as a component of civil society was the establishment of the UN Volunteers Program in 1970 (United Nations Volunteers, n.d.). A similar initiative had been launched earlier in 1961 by the U.S. Peace Corps. It is noted that in 2001, the UN proclaimed the International Year of Volunteers, which marked global acknowledgment of the significance of social and civic volunteerism.

While the use of the term volunteering in practice raises no particular disagreements or controversies, this phenomenon has been studied in science from various perspectives. For example, issues of motivation and the outcomes of volunteering have been examined by J. Wilson (Wilson, 2000) and R. A. Musick (Musick & Wilson, 2008). E. I. Kholostova examined volunteering in the context of social work (Kholostova, 2020), while L. M. Drobizheva studied its social and civic dimensions (Drobizheva, 2014). In general, student volunteering is understood as voluntary social engagement by students, which may include activities such as environmental patrols, support for vulnerable groups, social startups, educational initiatives, and more.

If soft skills are understood as a person's ability to interact effectively with others that is, possessing communication abilities, empathy, emotional intelligence, and stress resilience then volunteering acts as a favorable and natural environment for the development and strengthening of these skills. It provides opportunities for the practical application of soft skills, informal learning (learning-by-doing), and the accumulation of experience in civic and social responsibility.

To solve the second research objective, in addition to theoretical analysis of academic literature, the method of examining official documents was also employed.

In fact, one of these documents became the conceptual impetus for our study. It concerns the third concept (social GPA), which at first glance suggests an internal unity among the phenomena we are examining. In this context, we have identified two key regulatory documents that govern the implementation of IGPA in the higher education system of the Republic of Kazakhstan:"

1) Regulations on the pilot mode implementation of the integrated GPA (including the Social GPA), approved by the Order of the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated June 20, 2022, No. 288.

2) Methodological recommendations for the assessment of student achievements considering the IGPA, approved by the Order of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated January 4, 2024, No. 2.

The second document is conceptually based on the provisions of the first and further develops the proposed model. Specifically, Section 1, Paragraph 5 of the Methodological Recommendations emphasizes the importance of the Integrated GPA as a tool that reflects the development not only of professional (hard) skills but also of "soft" skills:

"Education that develops 'soft skills' along with professional skills (hard skills) is aimed at the realization of all missions of the university..." (Methodological Recommendations, 2023).

Furthermore, Section 2, Paragraph 6 it is emphasized that the Methodological Recommendations establish "the procedure and organization for the assessment of students' research and social competencies through the Integrated GPA".

In addition, the document provides a list of criteria for assessing SSCI which includes:

- participation in peer-assisted learning;
- development of communication skills;
- demonstration of creativity;
- participation in sports and wellness activities;
- stimulation of intellectual growth;
- participation in public speaking.

Despite its broad scope, the presented list focuses primarily on aspects of social activity, correlating only partially with the concept of soft skills. It is worth noting that throughout the text of the document, up to the approximate scoring breakdown, the emphasis was placed on social competencies. We believe that such terminological looseness has led to the structural vagueness of the criteria mentioned above. Indeed, these concepts are not interchangeable, as social activity is an indicator of the development of certain social competencies manifested externally and observable in a person's actions, deeds, and behavior. Also, in our view, the criteria such as "demonstration of creativity," "development of communication skills," and "stimulation of intellectual growth" are somewhat debatable, as they serve as a foundational basis for the first, fourth, and sixth criteria. For example, creativity can significantly enhance the indicators of participation in both sports and wellness activities as well as public speaking, and so on.

We believe that the revision of the specified criteria should be aimed at structurally integrating them with soft skills, since soft skills can be appropriately interpreted as social competencies and are directly linked to social GPA (SSCI in terms of the document analyzed). Therefore, in our strong conviction, the criteria framework should include skills such as teamwork, mediation abilities, leadership qualities, stress resistance, empathy, emotional intelligence, and others. This would establish a methodological foundation for the appropriate assessment of students' social competencies, which, in turn, would ensure the selection and development of reliable assessment tools.

If we consider the officially accepted interpretation of the integrated GPA (IGPA) as a comprehensive evaluation encompassing academic performance (GPA), research skills (iROS) and social competencies (SSCI), we believe that evaluating social competencies in actual higher education practice in the country poses the greatest challenge. Altering the evaluation criteria for these competencies will necessitate a simultaneous revision of the assessment methodologies. In this regard, it can be confidently stated that pedagogical and psychological sciences possess a sufficiently rich arsenal of diagnostic methods.

The scale-up of the pilot initiative to implement an Integrated GPA, planned by the authorized body for science and higher education in Kazakhstan, may lead to a significant decline in student achievement metrics. Therefore, the concerns of many university academic service leaders regarding this initiative can be considered justified provided that a proper system encompassing all three key indicators is absent, from assessment tools to systematic documentation of results. It should be noted that the Kazakh scientific and educational community possesses considerable experience in evaluating academic achievements and equally strong skills in monitoring students' research practices. The situation is entirely different when it comes to social skills. Evidence of this was revealed in a rapid online survey of instructors from four Kazakh universities participating in the "Foreign Language: Two Foreign Languages" educational programs (Online survey "Soft Skills"). The results of this survey, along with their analysis and synthesis, are presented in a separate article prepared for open-access publication. In the present article, we will very briefly outline the consolidated findings, which are as follows:

- among the 94 respondents, an overwhelming majority (91.5%) confirm that "soft skills" are included in their educational programs;
- likewise, a large majority (90.4%) report that they assess these skills;
- responses to the third question indicate that teaching staff employ a variety of methods (e.g., essays, compositions, presentations, etc.).

However, based on the authors' experience (all of whom have extensive backgrounds in higher education) and individual interviews and discussions with colleagues, it has been found that the assessment of "soft skills" is not documented. In other words, there is a practical

foundation for evaluating social competencies within the integrated GPA framework, but it is fragmented and lacks a systematic approach.

A similar situation exists concerning student volunteering (a separate article is also being prepared based on a survey among students from several Kazakhstani universities): approximately half (41.8%) of respondents are unaware of or have only a general understanding of volunteering; an equal number (44.8%) are unaware of the volunteer movement at their university; and the overwhelming majority (82.1%) do not participate in the volunteer movement (Online survey “Student Volunteering”).

To address the third objective, the following methods were applied: 1) mapping and visualization of bibliometric analysis results using VOSviewer software and data from the Scopus international abstract and citation database; 2) synthesis and systematization of findings from the first two research tasks, specifically: the relationship between the concepts of "soft skills" and "volunteering", their mutual influence, the interpretation of the term "integrated GPA," its components, and assessment methodologies with a focus on "social competencies" (SSCI); 3) analysis of the current situation based on rapid surveys with a representative sample, practical experience of the authors in the educational process, and brief interviews with university representatives (administration and faculty); 4) designing recommended mechanisms for integrating student volunteering, soft skills, and social competencies within the integrated GPA framework, based on the authors' interpretation and initiatives for structuring assessment criteria and SSCI.

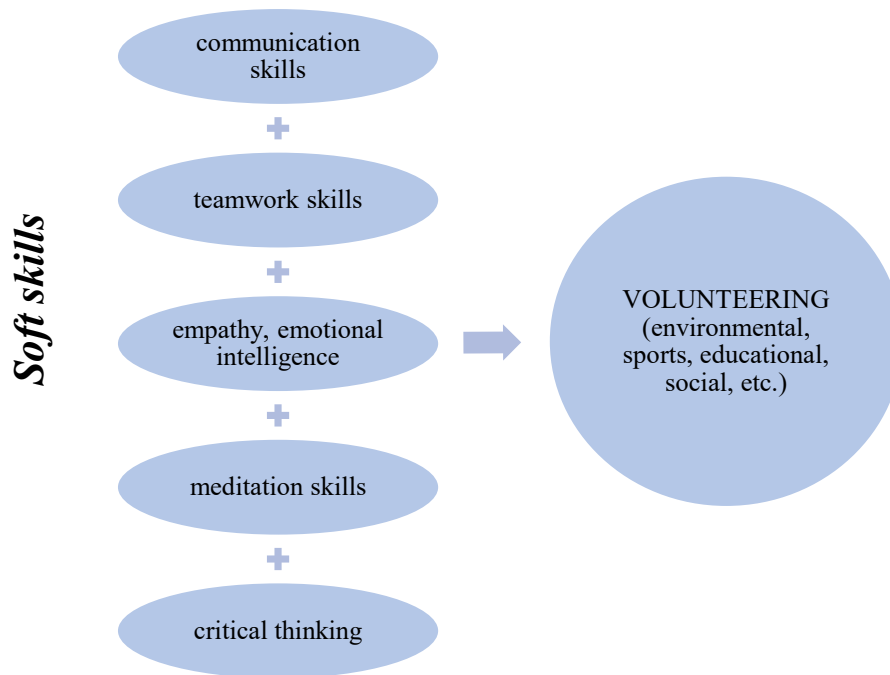
The entire research material obtained through the applied methods allows us to affirm the relevance of the issue under consideration, as well as the importance and significance of scientific efforts aimed at developing soft skills of students and promoting the principles of volunteering in higher education institutions of Kazakhstan.

### **Research results and discussion**

Result one. The correlation between the concepts of “soft skills” and “volunteering” is determined by the fact that the latter is a kind of environmental tool for the development and strengthening of the first phenomenon. At the same time, the set of soft skills components is quantitatively broader and qualitatively more specific. In other words, to promote the values and principles of volunteering within the student community, it is imperative to first cultivate soft skills. These include: communication skills – the ability to establish constructive interactions in the majority of life situations, thereby serving as the foundation for effective teamwork; teamwork skills – achieving common goals both short-term and long-term through the fulfillment of individual responsibilities, which are determined by one's position (vertical: management subordination) and role (horizontal: equivalent and necessary functions); empathy and emotional intelligence – the capacity to understand the psycho-emotional state of communicants, allowing for temporary concessions in contentious situations and strict adherence to ethical standards in relationships; mediative skills – the ability to manage conflicts of varying levels, complexities, and types (both intrapersonal and interpersonal) that inevitably arise; critical thinking – the process of seeking information, conducting comprehensive analyses, and drawing well-founded, reasoned conclusions, accompanied by a healthy skepticism regarding the credibility of any information and the validity of one's own beliefs and positions.

Thus, the relationship between soft skills and volunteering can be visually represented as follows: all soft skills though varying in degree collectively form the foundation necessary for effective volunteer work (see Figure 1). Furthermore, participation in voluntary assistance requires additional personally and socially significant attributes, including interests and motivations, awareness, passion, activity, and both terminal and instrumental values, among others.

**Figure 1**  
*Soft skills as factors of successful volunteering*



Such an approach, within the context of social GPA, provides a structure for its criteria that differs somewhat from that proposed in the aforementioned Methodological Guidelines for the implementation of integrated GPA.

On this basis, we propose the following criteria for assessing social GPA:

- 1) Participation in volunteer and social projects:
  - number of hours engaged in volunteer activities;
  - diversity of volunteer activity types;
  - level of involvement (role type: participant, organizer, leader, coordinator);
- 2) Demonstration of soft skills:
  - communication skills;
  - teamwork skills;
  - empathy and emotional intelligence;
  - mediation skills;
  - critical thinking;
- 3) Initiative and leadership:
  - initiating one's own project (social, entrepreneurial, cultural);
  - leading a group/initiative.
  - presenting in student communities;
- 4) Public recognition and achievements:
  - medals, diplomas, awards (creative and sports competitions, championships, tournaments, olympiads, accelerators, etc.);
  - articles in mass media, posts in social networks, reports at public events.

Thus, we propose four criteria for evaluating the Social GPA (SSCI). All criteria align with the following principle:

Relevance and appropriateness. This means that all the criteria have been selected to serve the main goal of introducing the Social GPA in universities of Kazakhstan, namely:

“...preparing graduates for service to society by fostering active civic engagement, promoting the ideas of patriotism and labor for the benefit of the country, and involving youth in addressing socially significant issues...” (Drobizheva, 2014, p. 10). This also determines the relevance of implementing the Social GPA, which is aimed at monitoring students’ contributions to the development of both their university and society as a whole.

**Measurability.** The first criterion is assessed using two quantitative and one qualitative indicator, all of which can be fully supported by factual materials (for example, a volunteer’s diary/book with relevant records of participation in events; diplomas/certificates from competitive selection processes or expert evaluations of both volunteer and social projects, indicating the role performed, etc.). The second criterion requires a more complex evaluation system. Here, a triangulation method is necessary, i.e., the same indicator is measured using at least three different methods to independently confirm the results (Online survey “Student Volunteering”; Morgan, 2024). This method ensures the objectification of subjective opinions/assessments: self-assessment, feedback from the academic advisor and two or three faculty members who have taught the student over several semesters, psychological diagnostics, evaluations from internship supervisors at partner organizations, and peer opinions. Naturally, this requires formal documentation based on evaluation sheets. Thus, a psychological-pedagogical monitoring system is formed, the ongoing implementation of which becomes the responsibility of a designated structural unit within the university. Ultimately, this ensures an objective and informative (digital) student profile (Kostina et al., 2024; Zhetpisbayeva et al., 2022). As for the third and fourth criteria, their assessment procedures are largely similar to those used for the first criterion. The principle of measurability, if properly followed for all these criteria, eliminates ambiguous interpretations and ensures the objectivity of the evaluation.

**Achievability.** The alignment of the proposed criteria with this principle is reflected in their indicators and they can be achieved within the given timeframe, available resources, and existing conditions. Moreover, all indicators are already present in the real-life educational practices of modern universities in Kazakhstan. It is also worth noting that this principle is closely related to the principle of measurability.

**Flexibility.** This principle implies that the proposed criteria are not exhaustive; in other words, they can be regularly updated in terms of indicators, evaluation procedures, and assessment tools depending on social policies and the development priorities of both individual universities and the higher education system of the country as a whole.

**Encouragement and motivation.** All the proposed criteria, when applied in practice through the implementation of an integrated GPA, will undoubtedly contribute to increasing students’ motivation not only for academic excellence but also for the development of their social competencies.

Overall, all the specified criteria are, to some extent, a priori, as they represent classical principles of the theory and practice of pedagogical measurement. These principles, though interpreted with a certain degree of authorial perspective, are logically and consistently relied upon by contemporary researchers and experts (Kosherbayeva & Kasymoyova, 2020; Kosherbayeva & Begimbetova, 2024; Gordienko, 2024).

Similarly, the criteria reflect fundamental pedagogical assessment principles that are consistently referenced albeit with individual interpretation by modern scholars and practitioners (Morgan, 2024; Kostina et al., 2024; Zhetpisbayeva et al., 2022). Thus, the assessment of the first, third, and fourth criteria (volunteering, initiative and leadership, public recognition and achievements) requires factual evidence (such as a volunteer’s logbook or passbook, project reviews, presentation protocols, medals, certificates of merit, diplomas, or certificates). The second criterion, soft skills, requires the use of psychological testing tools



(for both self-assessment and peer review), independent references, or feedback from mentors and development trackers, as well as psycho-pedagogical observation.

To document this process, it is proposed to introduce assessment sheets, which at the initial stages of the expected large-scale implementation of the Integral GPA (IGPA) should be maintained by university teaching staff responsible for general education courses (History of Kazakhstan, Philosophy, Physical Education, Foreign Language, Kazakh/Russian Language, Cultural Studies, Sociology, Psychology, Political Science). At later stages, this process should involve the entire teaching faculty, including invited practitioners. We believe this approach will ensure not only the successful implementation of the IGPA system but also the promotion and support of initiatives aimed at engaging students with universal and national values.

All evaluations, in our opinion, can and should be analyzed in terms of the influence of the social GPA on students' academic and research achievements.

This proposal relates specifically to the assessment of the second criterion "Demonstration of Soft Skills." The remaining three criteria would be more effectively assessed by dedicated university services (academic, research, and social units) that support the core macro-processes of university education.

Furthermore, all evaluations should be integrated into platforms such as the AIS "Platonus." This automated information system, used by many universities in Kazakhstan, offers the necessary tools and capabilities to create a digital student profile with access for external stakeholders (such as employers and other relevant parties). The digital profile itself can include metrics for all components of the Integral GPA (IGPA).

Undoubtedly, all results should be recorded in quantitative terms (points, coefficients), which each university may define independently. These results should be officially documented in a student's individual portfolio at regular intervals (e.g., during midterm assessments at the end of each semester/trimester).

### **Conclusion**

The research presented in this article allows for several key conclusions. Student volunteering is as a socio-pedagogical platform for the development of soft skills, and the integration of these elements has a direct impact on students' social GPA, thereby enhancing indicators of personal progress. The debate regarding the measurability of students' soft skills lacks strong justification, as contemporary science offers a broad array of psychological and pedagogical tools for effective assessment.

The results of the conducted research based on the results of the public discussion can be fully implemented in the practice of applying the social GPA in universities in Kazakhstan and serve to improve the regulatory framework for scaling the results of a pilot project to assess student achievements through the Integrated GPA (IGPA) model.

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### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

### **Author Contributions**

Lyailya Syrymbetova: Writing - preparation of original project, Author supervision, Reviewing and editing, Project administration; Albina Garipova: Research, Conceptualization, Methodology, Resources; Aidana Shaimerdenova: Validation, Formal Analysis. Darya Khramykhina: Data Collection, Visualization.

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